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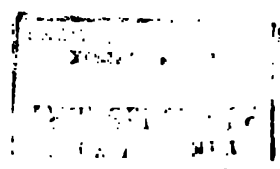


**THIS BOOK CLEAN**  
**TN DOWN THE LEAVES**



**THURLEY RUXTON**









*The slightest panic at the steering post, and the crash  
would startle the air*

PAGE 25

# MURLEY REXTON

BY  
PHILIP VERRILL AUGHEARN

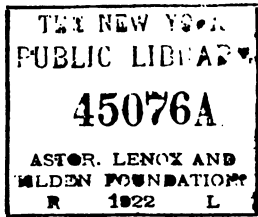
AUTHOR OF  
"THE PEASANT OF GOLD"

*Illustrations by*  
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1917



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## CHAPTER I

### A SUNSET

At the end of a perfect day in June, with indolent warmth and perfume in the air, New Haven Harbor was a theater of color, life, and song. The sunset splashed the dancing tides with gold, vermillion, liquid fire, and blue; a hundred rose-white wings of yachts, canoes, and catboats were lifted gracefully against empurpling shadows as they glided to and fro in paths of pleasure; and a crew of lusty college youths sang tuneful melodies which floated on the lazy breeze in charming harmony with hour and scene and season. It was one of those evenings, perilous throughout the world, in which the very atmosphere becomes the subtlest of love's philters and youth rises gladly to the draft.

Among the winged water craft was one particularly striking sloop, fast parting the ripples of amethyst and green as she slipped straight homeward toward the landing stage, which was still half a mile to the lee. It was not that the sloop was extra large; it was merely that her sails were gorgeously tinted, in the manner of boats that ply the waterways of Venice. It was a wonderful tint of orange she spread against the sky, with a strange device in gold far up in the peak of her canvas. In the glory of the sun's last

riot of color, she seemed some fragment of the sea's and sky's mosaic, blown adrift upon it all and bearing away to the green of the wooded shores. And, as if to complete her perfections in the scene, her slender red tiller lay snugly in the palm of a girl of exceptional beauty.

It was Thurley Ruxton, bare of arm and bare of head, with her eyes gazing straight past Gaillard, sitting near, to the landing stage for which she was skilfully heading. What a marvel of color she presented! Her hair was gold, absolute gold, of astonishing luxuriance and luster. Her eyes were the deepest of chocolate brown. Her brows were almost black, and arched with exquisite lightness of outline. In her cheeks glowed the warmth of a soft, red rose, against a white-rose tint of neck and chin. Her lips, which out-reddened the sunset's own vermilion, were slightly parted over teeth of daintiest regularity and pearliness. Her costume, of gold-brown pongee silk, with a tiny crimson tie, found the most engaging completeness in her little, red, low cut shoes, near the big, shining brown ones of Gaillard.

The boat was Gaillard's *Tigress*. Thurley had sailed it before, while he, as now, had sat there to watch her in his calm, unemotional manner, nodding approval from time to time with an air of conceded lordship over all. Perhaps it was something in this lordship attitude that appealed to Thurley's nature.

She was capable, fearless, and self-reliant herself, and such a woman loves in a man the strong, primordial assumption of ownership. She had, however, loved him from the first; and five long months of consent in her heart had effaced all possibility of analysis, either

of her own emotions or of Gaillard's character. She was happy in his presence, particularly happy here this evening, and that was almost enough. The fact that no actual pledge had passed between them was the least of her negligible worries. By a thousand signs she felt secure in possession of his love.

Despite the fact that her gaze was apparently fixed on the shoreward course, she was watching him now and thrilling anew as she felt his frequent glances fall upon her. She met one such look with all the glory of her eyes, giving him generously the fondness, the admiration, the confession, of her inmost self, while a warm tide of color rose to her face from the quick, happy tripping of her heart.

He was handsome, big, and athletic, a smooth-shaved, blue-eyed fellow of robust health and color, with the blackest of hair and the straightest, most perfect of features. In his white flannel suit, immaculate and absolutely faultless, he fitted a niche on his spotless sloop as a diamond fits in its setting. He was possibly a trifle overperfect, a condition due perhaps to lifelong familiarity with wealth and all its tendencies to focus one's attentions on oneself. But Thurley was gratified, thoroughly, in all the demands of her being. He was a splendid product of the very latest moment. She loved him — and, heavens! what a setting for love was this tropic water, air, and sky!

A catboat, crowded full of Eli's joyous sons, went frothing by not twenty yards away. With one accord the boyish skipper and his company swung off their caps to Thurley, calling out in gladness of the meeting. And all were repaid by her friendly smile, despite their deep-laid envy of Gaillard. They were gone in a mo-



ment; yet in Thurley's heart they left exultation. She was honestly glad to be popular, glad to be admired, and glad to know what homage she declined from day to day in her absolute devotion to himself.

The more she could bring him of these gifts refused, the more precious she would be in his sight. And to be to him dearer than all the world, to be as priceless in his daily estimation as he had become to herself, this was the dream for which at last she had given the kiss that symbolized to her the custody of all her sacred being. Yet the look she beheld in Gaillard's face when the boys had surged by in their course, was needlessly inscrutable, even to her unexacting mind.

But the end of the cruise was at hand. She guided the sloop with automatic skill, doubling round to come up in the wind and so make the landing at the stage. Then at last she observed, as they neared their goal, the tall, slender figure of Major John Phipps, as he lifted his hat in salute.

If a momentary twinge of disappointment, occasioned by Gaillard's neglect to snatch at a moment in which to murmur some sweet bit of nothingness all for themselves, slightly colored the joy of the outing's end, she cast it aside with other trifling flaws in the deep-lying pleasure of the hour.

The sloop nosed quietly up beside the planks, and was caught by the jacky there in charge. The Major, his face aglow beneath his crown of snow-white hair and overhanging brows, stepped like the veriest young gallant to the rail to offer a hand for Thurley's disembarking.

"By Pollux!" he said. "You manage a boat like a master, Miss Ruxton! Yes, you do, I swear! I've

been watching, watching for the last fifteen minutes. Superb! How are you, Acton? How do you do?"

"O. K.," responded Gaillard succinctly, "thanks."

Thurley gave one of her hands to Gaillard, the other to the Major, and bounded out upon the stage. She was smiling in genuine pleasure.

"It's the *Tigress* you find superb," she said, "superbly trained and tamed. But thank you, Major Phipps. I shall treasure your compliment most highly."

"I meant it, Miss Thurley, I meant it all," declared the Major earnestly. "Let me add in proof of my sincerity that I'm looking out for a clever young woman to steer the course of my literary labors, down at my New York headquarters. And I said to myself, as I saw you bring in the *Tigress*, 'Now, there's the young woman for the business!' I did, by Pollux! I said so, emphatically!"

Gaillard was looking at him stonily.

Thurley slightly colored. "Why — but — what an idea!"

"Excellent, I call it — excellent," continued the Major. "Some one said you're teaching French and German here, Miss Thurley. Limited field and probably quite inadequate remuneration for any young woman of your ability. Takes brains, you know, to sail a sloop. I wish I might prevail upon you now, right here, to undertake the guidance of my labors. That is, of course, if you —" He left it unfinished as he noted on her cheeks the telltale banner of color.

Gaillard was still dumb and staring.

"You are very, very thoughtful," said Thurley quietly, turning a momentary glance on Gaillard;

"but I fear I shall have to —" She paused, and the moment grew embarrassing.

"I see — I see," said the Major hurriedly, reddening himself and smiling understandingly on them both. "By Pollux! Of course! Pardonable blindness, I trust. No such oversight intended. Glad to know you'll — ahem! — guide a far more — ahem — poetic — But I assure you I feel my loss keenly, Miss Thurley, very keenly indeed, especially after I'd made up my mind to — but — Acton, what a gorgeous sunset!"

"Very fine," said Gaillard, and he took out his watch and gave it a glance with a barely perceptible show of impatience.

"The sunset reminds me, Major, that we must hurry," said Thurley, feeling some constraint in Gaillard's manner. "Thank you, very much and — good by."

She held out her hand, which the Major took for a momentary pressure. And when they had gone he stood gazing earnestly on the regal young figure of the girl at Gaillard's side, as the two walked away toward the town.

## CHAPTER II

### A DEPARTED GLORY

THEY had always walked the mile to Thurley's home, to prolong their hour of pleasure. To-night, as the dusk of evening slowly gathered, they were both exceptionally silent. Gaillard, indeed, had been far more than usually reserved all afternoon.

To Thurley's feminine intuition was presently vouchsafed an inkling of portent in the air. From time to time she cast a glance at Gaillard's face, as if to read his thoughts. She found him gazing straight ahead, persistently. A worry that she could not gloss with day-end happiness was present in her mind.

When she spoke at last she went frankly to the issue that she felt had been presented. "What a very odd encounter with the Major! It was — just a little bit embarrassing."

Gaillard answered, "Yes." He still looked straight ahead.

For some strange, inexplicable reason, Thurley felt a sinking at her heart. She summoned her courage to proceed. "It was kind of the Major, I am sure, to make me such an offer; but of course —"

She halted it there, wishing to have him complete her thought, wishing to see him flare up warmly, declare his ownership in all she was, and even abuse the Major for his blunder.

But he stared up the thoroughfare and was silent, while she waited at his side. Then at last he said,

somewhat hoarsely, "Why didn't you accept what he offered?"

For a moment she was certain she had heard incorrectly, that some unreal fear in her breast had voiced itself, as if from his scarcely parted lips; but, looking intently on his set, averted face, she felt an almost overwhelming weakness attack her, and her cheeks lost their color and were white.

"But — Acton — you — How could I?" she faltered helplessly. "After all that's happened between —" and she halted as before.

"All what?" he said after a moment.

He could hardly have asked a question more brutal. She realized suddenly that all she had given, her love, her kiss, which to her had been so very much indeed, meant possibly nothing at all to him, save a pleasure to be taken for the asking. Even then she did not and could not wholly credit her senses.


"All what!" she repeated weakly. "All what!"

"Yes — all what?" His voice was increasing in firmness as he found her weak instead of accusing. "I should think you'd be glad of the Major's splendid offer. It might mean a very great improvement."

"Do you mean," she said, as one in a dream, "that — that all you've said to me — and all the attention — that everything we've — everything means nothing at all? You — you're not suggesting, really —"

"See here, Thurley," he broke in immediately, "this sort of thing couldn't go on forever! You know that. I'm going away to-morrow, and I'm going abroad next week."

All the weight of his meaning, suspended before, crashed down on her unprotected head, as it were, and



left her partially stunned. She could barely think. She could not reason; she could not rise to anger.

"This — sort of thing?" she repeated.

"Certainly — just the usual college sort of thing," he confessed baldly. "You knew all along I'd some day leave and follow my career, the career my family will naturally expect, which of course never contemplated this."

She closed her eyes for the shame that rushed upon her, not so much for his intimation that between his family and hers there could be no hint of equality, not so much for this as for that sickening characterization of their association as the "usual college sort of thing."

Her whole nature shrank upon itself, abashed and quivering. The love she had given him she could not snatch away, it had gone beyond recalling; but the love she had folded to her heart — his love — was gone, while still her hands were blindly groping. It had never been hers; it had been a college loan, to be taken away like a pin or any trinket.

It seemed incredible, the whole affair, untrue that a man could change like this within a time so brief, after all he had said and all he had done and all she had given of her love.

Her voice was trembling when she spoke. "You — Acton, you surely do not mean that — I'm not to see you any more — that this is —"

"Why — of course we may meet — sometime again," he interposed. "Now let's forget it. We've been good friends, and what more could we ask? You've always been a thoroughbred, and I thought of course you'd be one to the end."

A thoroughbred! The end! She could make no re-

ply. She walked on in silence at his side. The shades of evening enfolded the world. The city lights were gleaming in their mundane firmament. A thin, chill stratum in the atmosphere swept by and almost made her shiver. She felt strangely benumbed and unreal, incapable for the moment of accepting as her own the pain that had come to her breast.

The little side gate at the house where Thurley lived was standing wide open when at last they came to the end of their walk in the dusk. Gaillard went in behind her, as she felt he would, and caught at her hand when they came to the all-concealing arbor in the garden. It was here he had kissed her just a week ago.

"Good by, Thurley," he said. "You're a thoroughbred, all right. It's no good to be foolish and harbor ill feelings, you'll admit." He drew her forward, in his way of ownership, to kiss her as before.

"No!" she said. "No!" and she pushed him off in the anger that was rising in her nature. "No more of the college sort of thing — not even a college good by."

She had snatched her hand from his grasp. Her eyes took on a look of molten lava. During one scorching second she studied his face for a sign, overlooked in her former trust, and beheld it on his lip and on his brow. Then, suddenly turning, she left him there and swiftly escaped to the house.

He stood for a moment gazing toward the door, and even started to follow up the path; but he presently faced about to the gate and slowly retreated down the street.

The dream was at an end. The sky had taken on a leaden gray, all the duller for the now departed glories.

## CHAPTER III

### A COLLEGE WIDOW

THE house where Thurley made her home was a boarding place exclusively for women. The building itself had once been a fine dwelling, in a fashionable quarter of the town. The quarter had, however, long since been deserted by the more exclusive set, now gone to an avenue of gold.

The property had come by descent to the ownership of the Misses Prue and Lavinia Lagree, both spinsters, gray of hair, but of admirable disposition, in the care of whom half a dozen young women, including Thurley Ruxton, had flourished in exceptional comfort.

To-night, as she let herself in at the door, Thurley crept to the stairs like a robber. She could not bear to meet the various inmates of the place and have them read her story in her face. She fled to her room without a sound, slipped in, locked the door, and then stood swaying, with her eyes tightly closed, and one hand pressed upon her bosom.

It was over — all of it — over and gone; and she, the proud, untouched by the rouge of mere flirtation, after months of exceptional popularity, with all its attendant temptations — she, no less than the weakest of her sex, was the merest college widow, after all!

A wave of mortification submerged her at the thought. A college widow! — another of the wretched, abandoned amusements with which the town was trag-



ically populated! A college widow! The name itself was a ribaldry, a scornful derision that would raise a smile to the lips of countless students still to come, who, in turn, would flirt, awaken love, and finally depart, leaving other college widows in their course.

And even yet it was not her pride that was wounded most; not yet, despite this outcome that she felt so detestably degrading. Her love had gone deeper than her pride, and in this she suffered shame and poignant anguish.

She had loved him so completely, so joyously, with all her strong young nature! She had loved him this evening, out in the sunset glow, with a new, sweet sense of surrender which it seemed he must almost have felt and understood. She had loved him so trustfully, dreaming her dreams, that now, with revulsions engulfing all her soul, she was rendered fairly faint with changed emotions.

She groped her way to the couch at last and fell on it in a mood of anger, despair, and humiliation. She did not cry; she simply hid her face and clenched both her fists till they ached.

Through every stage of wounded love she passed, to the stages of anger. Her pride had undergone indignities, and when it came to share in the woundings of her heart she was slowly making ready for reaction.

It came at last as a heated resentment that tinged every nerve of her being. She was angry all through, and something superb was in her indignation. Nevertheless, she did not descend to the evening meal; but lay for an hour on the couch before she felt she could even light the gas and stand face to face with her mirror.

When she did rise she stood abruptly, charged all at once with a resolution splendid in its strength. She would not succumb! She would not permit her heart to ache to breaking! She would not permit the world to know that another college widow was to let!

Galled in her pride by Gaillard's intimation that her origin was not on a par with his own, smarted by a realization that something of his hint was doubtless true, and stung by the sense that as long as she remained a teacher of languages in this college town she would be but a target for futile admiration and passing affairs, she resolved that everything should change, and Fate become her slave and not her master.

A thoroughbred! Yes, she'd prove she was a thoroughbred! No pain of heart should lie upon her sleeve! No sallow cheek, no faded smile, no sunken eye or trembling lip, should advertise her plight! She meant to laugh, to flirt, to sing, and then, in a week, or maybe even less, go down to New York, accept the offer made by Major Phipps, and deliberately undertake the task of forcing herself to the top.

She knew not how such a thing could be achieved; she merely knew that it had been accomplished by others in the past, and she felt that, though a thousand obstacles should loom across her path, she could find the strength in her outraged heart to meet and surmount them all.

She lighted her gas. There on her bureau lay an envelope, and behind it stood a photograph of Gaillard, mutely gazing on her face. Tempted for a moment to catch up the picture and tear it into fragments, she altered her mind, opened a drawer, and swept it in, face downward, among a lot of empty bonbon boxes, faded

roses, and ribbons which had come with many of his favors. The envelope fell to the floor, and she bent and took it up.

For a moment she glanced at it idly before she tore it apart. Then she knew what it was, an invitation, wrongly addressed and hence delayed, but sent three days before by Mrs. Clayton-White, one of New Haven's newest newly rich, to a "Topsyturvy" ball at her home this present night. The ball was one to which women were privileged to invite male acquaintances of their choice.

Not only did Thurley decide on the instant to attend, but she also determined to ask as her escort a hopeful admirer, good-natured Harry Shattuck, who alone of Gaillard's set had bested him at fencing and at chess. Color leaped warmly to her face at the thought that Gaillard himself would almost certainly be at the ball. She glanced at the mirror, gave a few restoring sweeps to her hair, then ran to the door and down the stairs to the 'phone at the rear of the hall.

Shattuck responded across the wire in a spirit of youthful exultation. Not only was he free to go to the ball, but also he was wild to attend, and would call at nine with his limousine car, and he knew they'd have a "ripping time."

Half an hour later Thurley was robing in her room, with one of the girls of the house to dress her hair. She had swallowed a cold, belated dinner; but had never appeared more animated in her life. The light in her eyes was a flame of warning fire; the pride in the poise of her regal little head was the natural, unstudied outcome of her newly completed resolve.

She was gowned at last, in a shimmering pale-green

toilet as filmy as a gossamer. It was cut only slightly décolleté; but, with the marvelously contrasted coloring of her lips, brows, eyes, and hair, it made a startling combination of things irresistibly charming. Only a faint flush of rose tint played in the perfect oval of her face, a color moving now toward her temples, now toward her chin, as if some zephyr wafted it thus about as it wafts a changing tint upon a meadow.

Shattuck arrived ahead of time, and his car softly purred at the gate. Then, when at length it was halted at the Clayton-Whites' and Thurley and Shattuck alighted, the one thing possible to make her moment triumphantly complete actually had the grace to occur. Gaillard arrived with a little Miss Snow, driven in an ordinary cab; and there in the glare of a white electric arc a greeting was exchanged between the four.

The smile and nod with which, apparently so far as Thurley was concerned, the affair of the afternoon was dismissed, disconcerted Gaillard utterly. Indeed, the last person he had expected to encounter here was Thurley Ruxton. Already his evening was beginning with a scowl.

It was Thurley's hour. Never had any hour within her life been more thoroughly conceded to her queen-ship.

Gaillard, unable to endure it longer, forced his way, as if by unsundered right, through the group to her side.

She met his gaze and nodded brightly.

"May I ask for your card?" he said, burning red to his ears. "I hope for a waltz — or two — or three."

"There isn't one — too bad!" she said, smiling at

him gayly. "Perhaps you could ask for an extra. Ask Mrs. White."

"I will," he said.

He did, and was granted his boon. Thurley danced with him gladly.

And something that savored of divinity in motion was generously bestowed upon her. Something possessed her to waltz in Gaillard's arms as she never had waltzed in her life. She led him to brinks of new infatuation, all to hide the truth that for an hour he had crushed her like a rose beneath his feet. It appeared to all that nothing had been changed, as they watched the pair together on the floor.

Gaillard himself was bewildered, not only by her wonderful recovery, but far more than ever by her beauty. Some mad impatience to snatch back his own-ership goaded his vanity anew.

"Thurley," he said, looking down in her eyes, "I want one more of those waltzes. I've got to have two or three more."

She laughed. "Doesn't that sound like little Oliver Twist? Mustn't it be dreadful to want more mush, school mush, or college mush, especially when there isn't any more left?"

He felt she was laughing at him, treating his wishes as a joke. "I didn't know you were coming here to-night," he said. "You might have invited me."

"I thought you might be packing your trunk," she answered innocently. "I'm almost sure you said you were leaving to-morrow."

He glared down at her half angrily. "You don't care!" he said.

"About what?" she answered. "Dancing? Oh,

yes, I do — and that tall, ungainly looking Billy Linkerton waltzes like a swallow. You'd never believe it in the world. He's a bifurcated poem. He glides like a jellyfish in cream. You'd as soon expect a ladder to attempt a minuet; but he really has a soul for rhythmic motion."

She could think of nothing further to add to all this frippery, and Gaillard, utterly incapable of comprehending her mood, and annoyed and piqued, relapsed into sullenness.

To Thurley, in the moment that the waltz was ended, came ineffable relief. A dozen eager swains were presently swarming about her as before, and Gaillard could do nothing but retreat.

Nevertheless, she was faint at heart, now that the worst of it was over. The dance with Gaillard had proved to be an ordeal taxing all her powers. She was weak, despite her air of buoyancy, and conscious always of a deep-lying hurt.

By twelve o'clock, when her purpose was fulfilled, the reaction came upon her. Beginning to be physically exhausted, she found herself the ready prey of all the aches postponed by her artificial joys. Her game had been played, her triumph was complete; but she had barely the strength to meet the demands of her most exacting rôle through the process of making her escape.

She left with Shattuck in his waiting car and was taken directly home. A final sparkle of incandescence was conjured to her eyes in the smile she gave him at parting. Then at last she was once more alone in her room, sadly requiring rest.

## CHAPTER IV.

### A FATEFUL ENCOUNTER

WHAT an eon of time a few heavy weeks may seem, when an unexpected crisis has inaugurated a new life's calendar! It was nearly five months since that sunset hour in which Thurley Ruxton's dream had faded in the sky, and even less since she had taken charge of the work for Major Phipps; yet it seemed a time that extended far back into other ages of her being.

To-day, with fates and change once more impending, she felt — she knew not what. She was not precisely sick at heart, but perhaps merely overwhelmed and utterly belittled by the size, the indifference, the ceaseless heave and tumult, of gigantic New York, the city that, having been made by man, now made and unmade him in an hour. The huge device of stone and iron had received her as the sea receives a raindrop. She was one of a swarm of human beings, all blindly working, working, working, as bees seem to work, — no one individual for himself alone, but each for all, despite himself, to gratify the law of existence.

It was not to be escaped, comprehended, or measured, this unrelenting enginery of life. There seemed to be nothing, absolutely nothing, she could do to lift herself apart. She was simply submerged in the human tide which must rise or fall with the mighty laws that govern the cosmic scheme.

She was sitting alone in Central Park, far out on its western border, pondering all her former dreams of rising to some brilliant eminence, on which to receive the tribute of the world. The day had been cool. A few drops of rain had driven scores of park visitors back to their homes.

Thurley was weary enough, after four miles of walking, to be glad of a rest on a bench. During the first exciting weeks of her metropolitan adventures she had sought, with conspicuous success, to achieve an understanding of the ways to genuine usefulness in directing the work that Major Phipps was so mightily toiling to produce. She had likewise been confident of bounding soon to splendid things. She had won the Major's approval, his gratitude and trust, from the first of her employment. But she had found herself uncomfortably popular with all his force of clerks, and then her disillusionment had presently begun.

The Major was her loyal friend, sincere and earnest in his praise, and that was all. She had neither expected nor desired social equality or opening of the magical door from the source of this association. She had readily discovered a fairly agreeable domicile; her wages were saving themselves. Altogether it appeared as if, after all, the commonplace Fates had assumed a foster parenthood to guard her on a simple, modest way, regardless of her dreams. A certain sort of utilitarian career seemed, in its sphere, even fair and promising; but then — there was something that constantly gnawed at her inmost heart.

The one brief effort she had made to discover a cousin, Edith Steck by name, whom she had vaguely known to be somewhere in New York city, failed, and



had never since been renewed. She had thought at the time that loneliness explained the sum total of her cares. She knew at last it was not that only, but things that went deep as life itself.

She had purposely avoided proffered friendships of the useless, unedifying description, choosing to remain aloof from anything save mere acknowledgments of acquaintance with all her fellow workers and the people of the house where she lived. To-day she wondered if it had paid. She almost wished for any sort of friends, provided they were honest and sincere.

For fifteen minutes she scarcely stirred, sitting there lost in meditation. To what would it lead, this toil and hope, this excursion into the maelstrom of the town. What might anyone, situated thus, achieve at last, now that she was launched upon the tide? A faint, mirthless smile crept slowly to her lips, freshening the radiance of her beauty. She shook her head, as if her knowing self thus gently rebuked the self of groundless dreams.

How beautiful was all the scene! This was almost enough to require, — the bright green grass, with scattered leaves of vermilion and amber upon it, the gold and garnet trees, the cool, sweet air, saturated full of essences autumnal.

Idly she gazed across the park, then at a squirrel frisking joyously by. Thus her glance came presently to rest on a small, white object lying on the grass, just at the end of her bench. The object was a handkerchief, a dainty lace confection, immaculately clean, folded in the neatest little square, and marked with a small, raised design. She took it up. A faint, subtle fragrance was wafted to her senses. The tiny thing

was of cobweb frailty. The design was a crest, wrought with exquisite art in the tissue.

She was holding it carelessly, when a muffled percussion attracted her gaze down the level roadway to a shadowed turn, some distance off in the trees. There a large blue touring car was leisurely rolling into view, in charge of a bareheaded man, a fine but bored appearing young viking, who was driving about alone.

Thurley, watching, felt a sudden splash of rain which brought her to her feet with quick decision to move to better shelter; but the shower broke almost instantly, quite unheralded, as if it had spilled through a sieve.

It was one of those downpours, swift and violent, against which an umbrella is practically no protection. Thurley raised her silken tent at once, however, and fled to the base of a tree, still watching the car in the road.

The driver, she noted, was clean shaven, broad shouldered, and ruddy. He was obviously disturbed by the drenching of a robe in the rear of his car, and cast a quick look upward at the sky. Making a momentary spurt, as if to race and so abbreviate his discomfort, or concern, he abruptly altered his mind, halting the car not fifty feet from the place where Thurley stood. Then, attempting to leap out hurriedly, over his levers and the casing for extra tires, he was tripped and thrown with exceptional violence, landing face downward in the road with an arm crumpled awkwardly beneath him.

Thurley uttered a little cry, to see him plunge so heavily on his under-twisted hand. She moved a few steps forward in the rain. He scrambled at once to his

feet and turned, his face tensely drawn and excessively white, his left hand clinging to his limber right wrist as he weakly reeled back against the car.

That the man was in agony was obvious. The eloquence of pain was in his poise. He could barely stand. The rain beat down on him savagely.

Out across the intervening space Thurley ran without a moment's hesitation. Her umbrella was raised and rain was bouncing from its roof.

"You're hurt!" she said as she came to the car. "Perhaps there is something I can do."

The man had seen her coming. He gazed at her mutely for a moment, his lips compressed with pain.

"It's broken," he said, "my wrist."

Thurley had come sufficiently close to hold her umbrella above him. It had all been done in obedience to something impulsive in her nature. The man was suffering intensely. She had utterly forgotten herself.

"Tell me what to do," she said in her earnest manner. "I know it pains you horribly. What shall I do to help?"

He tried to smile, then closed his eyes, leaning heavily against the wheel, a muscle twitching near his mouth. The rain entirely ceased, as abruptly as it had come.

"I suppose I'll have to let some one drive me home," he said, struggling with a quiver of pain in all his being; "but I hardly like to impose upon you, to ask you to look me up a man."

"Couldn't I drive you to the nearest relief?" asked Thurley simply. "It might take so long to find help."

He looked at her curiously. His eyes, despite his

hurt, burned warmly, in tribute to her beauty. He thought he had never in his life beheld a face so nearly divine. And indeed, as Thurley stood there by his car, unconsciously sublimated by her sympathy, she presented a vision that for sheer sweet loveliness could scarcely have been matched in all the world.

"You — drive?" he said, with no attempt to conceal an astonished incredulity. "Do you mean that you could really take the wheel?"

"Oh, yes, if you need me, need my help," she answered readily. "It can't be very far, I'm sure, to a place where — where of course you will do much better." She hesitated, looking at him gravely, adding, "I couldn't do less. I knew you were hurt. I couldn't stand by and do nothing."

"You are very kind," he said, looking at her oddly, as before. "I hope you will pardon my wretched limpness. I'll probably feel much better sitting down."

"Shall I help you to get in the car?" she inquired. "Perhaps you'd better lean on my arm."

"No — no — I'm all right — quite all right — if you'll just get in," he replied, and weakly he followed where she passed round in front of the car to mount the unobstructed side.

"If you'll tell me where to go," she said, as she took her place, with the wheel in hand, and speeded up the motor, "I'll do my best to —"

"Down through the park to Columbus Circle," he interrupted, sinking limply in his seat. "Kindly overlook my impatience."

She dropped back the brake, with her foot on the clutch, set the speed control at the first, and the car

glided smoothly up the road. Half a minute later she had shifted to direct, and her passenger nodded his approval.

He continued to cling to his wrist. The pain had surged entirely through his system, down as far as his knees. It had sickened and rendered him utterly nerveless; nevertheless, as he looked on her face, he was strangely abstracted from his suffering.

A sudden outburst of sunlight was poured down on her at a parting of the clouds, and the gold of it made her a goddess. She had dropped the dainty lace handkerchief down beside his foot; but neither of them knew it was there.

Round a narrow curve she swung the car — and the man beside her started, uttered a smothered note of apprehension, and rigidly froze in his seat.

Bearing down on them, in criminal madness of speed, two huge red cars, with hoods abreast, were racing like motion-crazy demons.

They practically occupied the road, and to it they clung, each of the drivers stubbornly determined that the other must slack and give off to the side to let the blue touring car pass.

Thurley was out at the middle of the road. There was neither time nor opportunity to shift her position. The two wild comets charging lawlessly upon her were scarcely more than four feet apart, from wheel to wheel.

A momentary indecision, a gasp of helpless fright, and she and her passenger, car and all, would be hopelessly in collision with one or the other of the fools in the road, where death might claim them all.

The man at her side was out of it — absolutely.

Cold sweat broke out on his forehead, so imminent did disaster appear. Even had he held the wheel himself, he could scarcely have known what to do.

It happened in the briefest fraction of a minute. Thurley stayed with the middle of the thoroughfare, driving as true as a die for the space between the on-rushing monsters. It was far too narrow to let her through when she headed for the gap. She could only hope to wedge it wider.

For a terrible second everything seemed hopeless. The wreckage of all three cars seemed inescapable as the coughing minotaurs hurtled upon her position. The swerve of an inch, a second's unsteadiness, the slightest panic at the steering post, and the crash would startle the air.

She was almost upon the race-tied pair when they gave to the nerve she was displaying. Even then they relinquished but a trifle apiece — and between the two, as they racketed by, she passed with a hand's width to spare.

"The fools!" cried the man who rode at Thurley's side. Then he sank even deeper into his seat, from sheer relief to all his throbbing nerves, plus the pain unrelenting in his wrist. "That was superb!"

A wave of color passed lightly across Thurley's cheek. She began to realize the strangeness of the situation, now that the threatened climax to the ride had sped away to the rear.

"You are going to a doctor first, I suppose?" she said, as she glanced about for a possible policeman and gave the car a perceptible touch of speed. "Your hand must pain you dreadfully."

"I — we're going — we'll see —" he answered unde-

cidedly. After a moment he added, "Perhaps I can manage to present my card," and he started as if to grope in a pocket with his uninjured hand.

"Please don't!" she begged. She cast him a quick, inquiring glance. "Is it necessary?" Up to now there had been for her no element of personality in all the encounter.

He tried to smile again, despite his pain. "Is anything necessary — anything that you or I did?"

For a moment she did not answer. Then she said, "Well — it happened. Here we are."

"Yes, it happened. Perhaps you'd rather I'd not introduce myself or inquire who you are?"

She colored. Someway, she did not care to confess that she was Thurley Ruxton, ex-teacher of French and German in a college town, and at present amanuensis for a reminiscent Major of the army. She someway felt that, for the moment at least, she occupied a sphere far different. And she had come to New York to escape the past, and escape her very self. Moreover, the touch of mystery the moment afforded, like a cloak in which to wrap herself, appealed to her sense of humor and the fitness of the situation. She flashed him a sunlit glance.

"Your wrist is the only thing that counts."

He continued to study her face, to marvel at her beauty, her poise, her mastery over the car. "At least I'd know whom to thank," he said. "That would gratify me greatly."

Her eyes were on the road ahead. They were lustrous with excitement and her natural animation. "Why attempt it, especially as I'd rather you wouldn't?" she replied.

"My impulse prompts a sense of obligation, just as your impulse prompted — this."

Her face became more grave, with sudden realization of what she had done. "But you were seriously hurt — you were helpless. I hope I was not inexcusably bold."

"Oh, please!" he pleaded. "Please be more kind to a pure, uncalculating spirit of humanism, if not to me. It was my wrist that was impaired, not my discernment."

Thurley made no immediate reply. Apparently all her faculties were focused on the car. They rode for a time in silence.

"What a splendid team — those horses!" she presently exclaimed, partly to relieve a situation that she felt was becoming hard to sustain. "They're beauties!"

The team in question was approaching in the road, far ahead. They were glossy bays, each with white feet that rose and fell in perfect unison to the tinkle and ringing of the silver equipment on the harness. They were driven to a landau of dark maroon, with coachman and footman in white, maroon, and black. On the cushions, alone and discontented, sat a woman well toward thirty-five, in the costliest of furs, and infinitely bored with all the world.

The man at Thurley's side glanced quickly from her face to the carriage they were about to encounter. "Oh — I wonder if you'd mind stopping," he asked her hurriedly, "just for half a moment?"

Thurley immediately threw out the clutch and applied the brake.

The woman in the landau had not only seen them



approaching and recognized the owner of the car, but was gracefully waving him to halt. Her carriage rolled up beside the big machine.

"Well, Robley Stuyverant!" she said, as he raised his cap. "I see you are in town after all — perhaps prepared to give me a few more trifling disappointments."

She was a beautiful woman, in a somewhat artificial manner, despite a certain smallness of her features.

The man in the car attempted to smile. He was still very white. "Really, Alice — Mrs. Van Kirk," he said, "I ought to be ashamed. I am — indeed I am. I thoroughly intended to come last Friday evening, and I counted on to-night; but just a little bit ago —"

"Robley," interrupted Mrs. Van Kirk, meantime gazing in rapt admiration on Thurley at the wheel, "I really cannot consent to another excuse this evening!"

"I've broken my wrist," he told her simply. "If it weren't for the kindness of —" He turned to Thurley. "Mrs. Van Kirk, permit me to present my deliverer, Miss — Miss Samaritan." He purposely mumbled the "Samaritan," in order to conceal his natural confusion.

Thurley and Mrs. Van Kirk exchanged a conventional murmur.

"Broken your wrist!" said the latter in genuine sympathy, but studying Thurley with penetrative eyes. "Dear me! That is simply ghastly! I thought you looked a bit peaked. Why, Robley, this is serious! I'm tremendously sorry. Isn't there something I can do? If you'd rather I should drive you home —"

"Thanks, no," he interrupted blandly. "But I trust my excuse is valid for to-night."

Mrs. Van Kirk hardly heard what he said, so intent was her inspection of the girl at Stuyverant's side. Never in her life, she felt, had she seen a young woman more beautiful, more abounding in possibilities, more desirable as an asset — a magnet for a lifeless drawing room. She was busily wondering who and what she could be, what relationship she bore to Stuyverant, and where he could possibly have found her. The party of the evening had slipped from her mind for the moment.

"Your excuse?" she echoed. "Valid? Indeed it is! My poor dear boy, it's cruel of me to keep you here waiting like this! But at least you'll come to see me? You don't walk on your wrist. Both of you come — do — come soon! You'll be out of it, Robley, driving your car, riding — everything. Do come and let me supply a little pleasure. Good by. I'll expect you soon."

She nodded and smiled at Thurley quite as much as at Robley Stuyverant. Then once again her landau rolled along to the jingling of silver on the trappings. The car with Thurley at the wheel proceeded on its way.

## CHAPTER V

### TEMPTATION AND A CREST

STUYVERANT did not speak at once, and Thurley was busy with her task. A few more carriages and several cars, enticed thus quickly to the park by promise of the sun, were met and passed. Still clinging to his broken wrist, the man with Thurley watched her intently, more and more engrossed by her beauty.

"You saw my embarrassment — my predicament," he said at length, referring to the recent introduction. "Now that you are acquainted with mine, don't you think I ought at least to know your name?"

"We are almost there — Columbus Circle," she answered, nodding toward the slender, graceful monument, visible now beyond the trees. "In a moment you will have a better driver. After that —" She left the sentence incomplete.

"After that?" he repeated. "You will certainly let me see you again, if only to thank you, to —"

She glanced at him brightly. "Oh, but you have thanked me already quite sufficiently. Where shall I drive you now?"

He suddenly felt that he could not permit her to go so soon — behold her vanish as strangely as she had arrived, leaving him nothing save the memory of a singularly delightful encounter.

"If you do not mind, perhaps I'd be wiser to go

home at once," he told her tentatively. "If it takes you too far from your own destination, the car is entirely at your service."

She flushed with pleasure at the thought of prolonging the joy already experienced, not only with the car, but also with its owner. She felt herself greatly tempted. It almost seemed as if the Fates had bestowed this opportunity upon her, this opening into the wondrous world whose gates she was eagerly seeking.

It might be so easy to push a little forward here, avail herself of this man's acquaintance, attempt to meet and cultivate Mrs. Van Kirk, and forge toward the gilded social goal! But she dared not assume the risk. They would find her out; she could not play the rôle; it was not the path by which she had hoped to succeed. As a matter of fact, she was unprepared for the developments the Fates had brought about, and could follow her instinct only.

But to take this injured fellow being home — that, at least, was barely human. She asked him quietly:

"Where do you live? On the farther side of the park?"

"Fifth Avenue," he answered, and told her the number and corner of the street. "Is it an imposition?" he added. "Because of course —"

"I'll drive you there," she interrupted. "I hope there's a doctor near by."

"And then you'll let me send you home, of course?"

She flushed to the tips of her ears. Permit him thus to discover the poor old tawdry place that was all she could call her home? She would rather have walked to the ends of the earth! She gave him the briefest of glances.

"I shall ask you to have me returned to the park, to the place where you found me, if you please."

"Oh, but —"

"Is it very much to ask?"

"It's nothing, nothing, less than nothing; but I hoped — I rather wished —" It occurred to him suddenly that she might have alighted from a car or carriage of her own, to sit for a time in the park. She might be missed by those who had left her with the squirrels — perhaps some man — perhaps some princely husband! He wondered why he thought of a Prince — and glanced at her wedding finger, only to find her hand was gloved.

"I wish to do anything to please you, to restore you to your previous enjoyment of the day," he told her honestly. "Are you sure that is all I may do?"

"Quite sure."

They were gliding swiftly through Fifty-ninth Street. They came to the Plaza, with its huge hotels, its dull gold equestrian statue of Sherman, and its tide of carriages and automobiles going into and out of the park.

Thurley turned the corner, entered Fifth Avenue, steered out round one of the huge green autobusses, and continued northward on her way. Stuyverant, more worried by the thought of presently losing the thrill of her presence at his side than he was by his swollen wrist, could think of nothing to say or to do that would penetrate the mystery of her personality. He had never felt so baffled or so eager in his life. He cudgeled his wits for a means for attaining his desire, to know her and exact a promise she would permit him to see her soon again; but all in vain. The imped-

ing termination of their ride seemed rather to confuse than to clear his senses.

"It does seem as if you might let me thank you, see you and thank you properly, when I'm more like myself," he suggested at last, as Thurley observed they had only another block to travel. "In your own words, is that so much for me to ask?"

"This is your street," said Thurley, once more coloring. "Up town or down town corner?"

"Up town," said Stuyverant reluctantly, and the car was brought to a halt beside the curb.

He alighted, experiencing a new attack of weakness and pain from his hurt. For the first time he noted the dainty bit of handkerchief lying at Thurley's feet. Then she too stepped out to the curb, to turn at once to the tonneau, open its door, and seat herself therein.

"I hope you will get immediate relief," she said. "Please do not delay any longer."

He fancied that some sense of embarrassment, together with impatience to return to her friends in the park, was revealed by the look in her eyes. "I'll send someone at once," he answered, loath to lose her from his sight. "I trust we're not saying good by."

Thurley too regretted the passing of the hour — her one golden hour in many months. She smiled. "Shall it be *auf wiedersehen*?"

His left hand, supporting his broken wrist, abandoned its charge for a moment. He raised his cap, enduring great pain in the effort. "*Auf wiedersehen*; for we shall meet again," he said. "I believe in fate."

"Oh, your wrist!" she exclaimed. "Please hurry with your wrist."

He nodded, and smiled, whitely, once more support-

ing his arm in his hand; then up the steps he ascended as the door abruptly opened and a servant in livery appeared.

Thurley watched him till he turned in the vestibule and smiled again, wanly. Then the servant shut his stoic suffering from sight.

Barely five minutes later another servitor appeared. Saluting Thurley with a semimilitary gesture, he first surreptitiously secured and pocketed the tiny lace handkerchief lying near the wheelpost of the car, — all by special order, — then assumed the seat so recently occupied by Thurley herself and headed at once for the park.

In the briefest seeming time they had come to the spot where Stuyverant's accident occurred. Here the man halted the auto and alighted to open the door.

"You are quite certain, Miss, I may not drive you elsewhere — may not be of further service?"

"Quite certain, thank you," answered Thurley, already experiencing a certain sensation of loneliness and depression, thus to face once more the desolation of her life, and she stepped from the car with a regal grace that made the man salute her as before.

He hesitated uncertainly for a moment; then, in strict obedience to instructions, once more resumed his seat and drove away.

Thurley sat down. She had nothing else to do, save to wonder at what had transpired. Once again the clouds obscured the sun, the gold and vermillion of the foliage dulled, and the lights burned lower in her eyes. She rose at last to walk from the park to the elevated road, for a train that would carry her home.

Meantime, Stuyverant, racked with pain as his sur-

geon set the broken bone in place, was all impatience for his man's return with the car. That worthy arrived with commendable promptness and sent up the filmy bit of lace he felt he had shamefully stolen.

No sooner was the injured man alone than he shook out the faintly perfumed gossamer and eagerly scanned the tiny mark embroidered in one of its corners.

A sense of joy and a sense akin to hopelessness arose in his being together. "A crest!" he murmured excitedly. "I knew it! I felt it in the air!"



## CHAPTER VI

### THE GODS OF CHANGE

THE one particularly fateful element in Thurley's unique adventure in the park was not entirely the effect produced upon young Stuyverant; it was quite as much the meeting with Alice Van Kirk.

In addition to being the niece of Major John Phipps, she was one of the wealthiest, uneasiest, and most original women in all New York. She was likewise one of the cleverest and shrewdest in gaining her ends. Married, thirty-five, domiciled in a modern Fifth Avenue palace, and consumed by social ambitions never yet wholly gratified, she presented a study in restless enterprise not to be lightly ignored.

For one brief season she had flashed so brilliantly on the rainbow peaks of social eminence as to dazzle the most blasé. Scores of the moths that flit to the blinding glare of gold had molted their wings to remain within the circle. Then had come envy, successful rivalry, a species of defeat for her, and retirement from the center of the stage. For two seasons she had sought in vain for the magical wand that would place again within her grasp the queenship she felt essential to existence.

Van Kirk, who detested the "social cyclone," was away to the north, scouring Canada, gun in hand, intent upon moose. His wife, with the season once more opening for lions and conquests in Gotham, had for

weeks been ready for anything socially desperate, and had felt herself helplessly baffled.

A hundred times she had conned the old devices employed in all her set, and a hundred times had flung them out as worthless for her needs. She was amply aware that nothing short of something new and resistlessly magnetic, something gleamingly startling, could avail to establish her anew.

To-day in the park the germ of a thought had sunk to the tropics of her brain, there to sprout with prodigious celerity and expand a luxuriant foliage. The germ had been planted by the sight of Thurley Ruxton, driving Stuyverant's car. With such a girl as that to exploit, what ends might she not achieve?

Who in the world could the girl have been, and where had Robley found her? That any young woman so brilliantly, unartificially beautiful, and able, moreover, to drive a car, could have entered the social constellation without her knowledge was to Alice Van Kirk a positive sting. She felt humiliated, excluded, reflecting that the Stuyverants and others of their circle had, as it were, kept her from knowledge that this exquisite girl had dawned upon their world.

Arrived at her home, she took no time for removal of furs or gloves, in her haste to employ the 'phone. She called up the Stuyverant residence, and soon had Robley on the wire.

"My poor dear boy," she purred in the mouthpiece sympathetically, "I am positively worried about your wrist! You've had it treated, of course?"

"Right as a trivet," answered Stuyverant cheerfully. "Good of you to call me up, I'm sure. And, by the way, Alice —"

"Robley, who is she, you lucky animal?" interrupted the woman impatiently. "You know in your pain you merely mumbled her name."

"No, not in pain; in desperation," he confessed, himself no less eager than Alice to discover Thurley's identity and devise some chance to meet her without delay. "I'm glad you called me up. You may be the one being on earth who can help me to find out who she is and where I may encounter her again."

"Robley!" said his sympathetic friend. "You don't mean to astonish this incredulous wire with the assertion that you don't know who she is? Why, my boy — but where —"

"Harken," he admonished. "You're aware that Princess Thirvinia is here in America incog?"

"I am, of course; but —"

"It may not be she. I'm half hopeful, half afraid, it is. She was all alone in the park when I had my fall. She came to my aid with all the simplicity and courage of royalty. I felt the indefinable air of something regal about her from the start. She would not reveal the first little hint of who she was, and insisted on being taken back where I had found her, by my man."

"Why Robley Stuy —"

"That isn't all. She dropped a little handkerchief in the car. I — I've got it now. Alice, the corner is marked with a crest! Now —"

"How could it be Princess Thirvinia? Of course she'd speak English perfectly; but her servants, her retinue, her equipage, and all?"

"When we know she's here incognito?" he answered. "How could she move about in the guise of a

plain American woman if retinues and royal coaches tagged her all through the park? I can't be sure; but if you had really seen her and read the descriptions of the Princess — ”

“ Good gracious! I never thought of that! Do you fancy any woman would have overlooked her wonderful eyes and brows, that gold of her hair, that color? Robley — ”

“ Alice,” he interrupted, “ there isn't a single being in the world with your cleverness to help me find her out. Don't you see that I've got to find her now? A man can't have the luck to break his wrist like that but once in a lifetime. How will you manage to find her? ”

“ Heavens!” answered Alice laughingly. “ Exactly as I'd pounce upon any needle in a haystack! I'm disappointed in you, Robley, to be candid. You've been stupid, really, to permit her to escape like this.”

“ By George! If I hadn't been wounded — ”

“ You wouldn't have found her at all.”

“ Of course; but — ”

“ And you mean to say that when you were hurt she came running to your assistance, alone? ”

“ In the pouring rain, with all her skysails — her umbrella — set. I never felt so weak in my life. The pain went straight down to my heels. She said I needed help — I did. She said she could drive — and she drove. There never was anything quite so superb in the world as the way she drove the car between — ”

“ You've got to come over to see me!” Alice interrupted. “ Come to-morrow, sure. I can understand that with your broken wrist you need even such poor assistance as mine. I am really quite distressed about your hand.”

"Distressed!" he echoed over the wire. "Great roaring ghosts! What a rank affront to luck! I'll be over in the afternoon to-morrow; and please be prepared with a little first aid to the —"

"Second aid — second-handed aid," she interrupted. "Now go and rest. Good by."

She hung up the instrument, and the period, afterward known as her "three-day-fever," had begun. It might with propriety have been termed an exasperation on her part and a desperation on the part of Robley Stuyverant. Both made prodigious but futile efforts to rediscover Thurley, and the mystery of who and what and where she was assumed new depth with every hour.

Meantime, Thurley was plunged once more into the hopelessly commonplace affairs of daily labor and boarding house existence, her dream of an hour already receding from her grasp over the ever present planes of stern reality.

There were moments of almost savage regret in her thoughts as she faced her grind, the barren outlook of day succeeding day, and the mockery of social splendor and achievement to be glimpsed and comprehended from afar. Some vague, insistent sophistry of her more unthinking self argued repeatedly that had she only maneuvered more adroitly, played the cards supplied her by that fickle visitor Opportunity more shrewdly, she might already be scheduled for some romantic escape from the yoke she must otherwise bear.

She was not deceived. She was certain in her heart of hearts that she had done the only possible thing in refusing her name to Robley Stuyverant and retreating from his ken unknown. And yet, to be snatched from

it all so soon, to be obliged to realize her own remoteness from the only sphere her nature craved, was galling.

She had anger with her fate. There were moments when, in her indignation at the slights put upon her by Acton Gaillard in the spring, she felt entitled to revenge on all his kind — entitled to injure all creatures of his ilk by the powers and arts and baits of love that had swept her own happiness away. For she had suffered much, during all this time alone in merciless Manhattan, with recurrent dreams of the might-have-beens and in contemplation of the ruins of castles one time built of the stuff of summer clouds.

There was never a moment, however, when she seriously thought of arranging even a second accidental meeting with the man with the broken wrist. She had taken no time to consider his personality; and he, aside from his natural sense of gratitude for the little she had done, had been too much in pain, she was sure, to observe her with attention. Yet she tugged at her fetters — and assailed the Major's work as if it had been a foe.

Wednesday afternoon the tantalizing Fates took another unexpected step, and Thurley, unaware, was confronting the gate in the wall, the gate to the modern Eden. The Major it was who prodded the gods of Change, with no such intention in his mind.

He had been to the stronghold of a publisher who the day before had received the first half of the volume on which he was working. He came to Alice Van Kirk's like a boy, unable to compass his delight. He had come to the gorgeous, empty house to dine, ostensibly. His appetite, however, was for talk.

Alice was alone, except for the presence of the fourteen servants in the house, and she had never in her life been more heartily glad to give him welcome.

"By Pollux! My dear," he said as he kissed her with genuine warmth of affection, "I've never been so happy since Antietam! Never! The book is a hit with my publishers, — bullseye, straight and clean, — and the title changed to 'Personal Recollections of Seventeen Engagements in the Civil War!' I'm the luckiest old curmudgeon in the country! I am, by George! Unbelievable luck! All that young woman's doing — order out of chaos — my raw recruits of fact in line all ready for dress parade or charge — recollections all wheeled into battalions like magic — the second half is practically finished. As an author I feel I begin to auth — with that young woman's assistance! I had to run right up and tell you."

"You are very kind," said Alice calmly. "It's a pity the pattern of your young woman paragon had not been more generously employed. If only they were made beautiful, regal, and discoverable more often, the rest of us might almost approximate a toleration of existence."

"Pessimism, my dear, pessimism!" answered the Major heartily. "The world is full of beautiful women. This exotic of mine — exotic, that's the proper description — is extraordinary. She is, by Pollux. Gifted, alert, sensible — too sensible to know how absolutely beautiful she is, even with all my force so dead in love with her they work like the bees about their queen! She's the finest product of the feminine gender I've seen outside of — outside of this room, by Pollux."

"Admirable retreat, with guns intact," commented

Alice dryly. "Is she blond or brunette? I've forgotten which you preferred a month ago."

"There you are, by George!" replied the Major triumphantly. "She's neither — both — well, golden hair, I admit — real, you know — real — magnificent — no bleach, by Pollux! none — and the darkest brows — no penciling, I'll swear it at the cannon's mouth! — and eyes as brown as a seal. No chance to paint or peroxid eyes, you'll admit — you're bound to admit. And there you are! I've a notion to write another book to keep her near. Beautiful! My dear, if I were only young —"

"Cease firing," she interrupted with awakening interest. "Are you sure of what you are describing? Remember, this is not the eighteenth engagement in the Civil War, and I want the facts. Do you repeat blond hair, brown eyes, and brows nearly black, her complexion rose and white?"

"I hadn't come to her complexion; but, by George! it is — it is; roses — that's it — roses, white ones and red. How in the world I ever got her to come —"

"Exactly," his niece interrupted. "Where and how did you get her? Who is the girl? It's the one you have mentioned before?"

The Major sat down. "Repeatedly. Told you about her way last June. Mentioned her frequently at Newport — always with enthusiasm too — maybe with ardor — probably with ardor. Tell you all I know about her — wonderful young woman!"

With commendable optimism and some perspicacity of statement he proceeded at once to enlighten his niece as fully as his information permitted as to who and what Miss Thurley Ruxton was and of how he had come



to employ her. He made scant mention of the apparent relationship she had enjoyed with Acton Gaillard; but admitted he had met her frequently in Gaillard's company — had accepted her socially, in fact, on Gaillard's indorsement — and had asked her nothing at all concerning her antecedents, having always been far more interested in the phases of her cleverness, her beauty, and her remarkable popularity.

Alice listened to all his recital with an interest peculiarly intent. "Why don't you bring her up and let me see the girl?" she presently demanded. "But no, on the whole, I think I shall call at your office, to-morrow afternoon."

A servant appeared and announced the dinner served.

## CHAPTER VII

### A CINDERELLA PROPOSITION

WHEN Thurley, complying with the Major's request, stepped briskly into his "army headquarters" to find herself confronted by the tall, gray-eyed woman from the palace on Fifth Avenue, she was merely a trifle surprised.

There was no recognition in the fleeting glance with which she met the scrutiny that Alice bent upon her.

"Ah, here we are, by Pollux, yes!" said the Major in his mildest artillery utterance. "Alice — er, permit me to present Miss Thurley Ruxton. Yes! Miss Ruxton, my niece, Mrs. Van Kirk — interested — wished to meet you — have a little chat. I'll leave you here together."

He disappeared and closed the door as Thurley turned to gaze inquiringly at the visitor, whose name she would never forget.

Alice met her astonished look with an arch and radiant smile. Not only had she instantly recognized the girl who had driven Stuyverant's car, but also with equal promptness had her mind conceived an extraordinary plan. "Miss Ruxton," she said, advancing with outstretched hand, "I am exceedingly glad to meet you — again. You hardly knew me for a moment."

Thurley took the proffered hand almost mechanically.

She flushed with color which instantly heightened her beauty as she wondered what the meeting might imply. "I — I remember now," she faltered, perhaps a trifle embarrassed by the thought of thus being discovered, revealed in her real capacity and personality. "Our meeting before was —"

"Quite informal," Alice interrupted; "but altogether delightful, nevertheless — that is, for me. Frankly, Miss Ruxton, I've been hoping to find you ever since. Won't you sit down — for a little friendly talk?"

Thurley followed to the corner where the older woman led; but was halted in the act of turning a chair about to face her visitor.

"Sit here on the davenport with me," said Alice engagingly. "I might as well tell you that I like you, at once, and have it over. I've really come back to make a proposition."

Thurley smiled, she hardly knew why. Her customary ease of manner returned with the smile as she took the seat denoted.

"I am not in the least a literary person, if it's anything more on books." She knew intuitively it was not concerning books that Alice Van Kirk had appeared. Vaguely she wondered what this woman of the world imagined concerning herself and Robley Stuyverant, — she a mere amanuensis, he the probable scion of an old and wealthy family, and the pair of them seen in his automobile, returning from — who might say where? An aspect of dread, the dread of being possibly misunderstood, assailed her unexpectedly. It had never even occurred to her mind before.

"Oh, books!" said Alice with an eloquent gesture of deprecation. "Do I look like that in the least?"

Thurley smiled. "That sort of genius sometimes runs in families."

"Infests them, you mean, my dear; but the Major is only my uncle. Let's be perfectly candid, you and I. First, I may as well confess I know all about your meeting with Robley Stuyverant last Saturday afternoon. He told me, of course. He doesn't know who you are in the least, thanks to your innate ladyhood. I can also readily understand that you hardly wish him to discover."

Thurley flushed anew. "Not because of anything —"

"Dear child, can't you trust me to understand? And no less than yourself I prefer he should not know."

Thurley was thoroughly puzzled. Her natural wonder was what Robley Stuyverant could possibly be to Alice Van Kirk, and why she should come here to-day. She could only echo, "You prefer he should not know?"

"Exactly. Now comes my proposition. I want you to come to my house — live with me — become my protégée — and meet him and all my friends on a social equality — immediately — at least by the end of the week."

Thurley could scarcely credit her senses. "But — Mrs. Van Kirk —"

"I know you don't understand it, of course, naturally, — why I should wish it, what possible advantage I hope to derive from such an arrangement, — but I told you I meant to be frank." She paused to lean forward and take the girl's soft hand in her own. "I need you very much indeed, and I rather hope you need me. Before you say anything at all, I wish to assure

you there will be no dubious conditions, no string to the offer I am making. Candidly, I require a magnet, such a magnet as all the gold in the world may never be, — a living, radiant magnet, to brighten my home, to draw success and interest about me, — such a magnet as you, my dear, would supply. I shall wish to treat you precisely as I might a younger sister, just come out, and would exact only a promise that, no matter what might be conjectured as to whence you came, you divulge nothing to the world, — assert nothing, deny nothing, — and agree not to marry, or to promise yourself in marriage, for at least a year from our association."

More and more Thurley's bewilderment increased. "But I can't in the least understand your motive," she confessed. "What could I possibly do that would repay you for your venture?"

"Dear child, you can wear gorgeous jewels, furs, and gowns like a Princess. You can go with me everywhere, help me entertain, fill my hollow house with the people I wish to attract, give me the things I most desire — and better your fortunes by the process."

Thurley shook her head gravely. "I don't see why you think so, Mrs. Van Kirk. I have never had that sort of education."

"But you have always been popular?"

"A little — with the college boys, I suppose. I hoped so — thought so, once."

"I was certain of that from the first," said Alice decisively. "My dear, that is all I desire."

Thurley looked at her quickly, a light of girlish inquiry burning in her eyes. "Do you mean you would wish me to — attract a lot of men?"

"Men, of course, men and women of the social set that once paid me tribute slavishly, and now — well, things are different now. I am no longer novel, I suppose. Perhaps I am too respectable. But you could help me bring them back — oh, all of it nicely, my dear, nothing dubious. I said before, and I repeat, I wish you to occupy just such a place as I'd give to a younger sister of whom I could always be proud and fond. Doesn't that clear away your doubts? Heavens! I hadn't the slightest thought that I might be misunderstood!"

Thurley burned a warmer color. "But — you can see how strange it seems to me?"

"Why, yes, child, I see it perfectly. That's why I'm going to ask you to think it over first. I asked the Major to bring you home to dine with me to-night; but perhaps you'd rather go in the car with me. Only he might tell you all about me — as he told me a little of you. I want you to know there is nothing sinister behind my offer, nothing you may not accept with pride and honor. There are elements of business in it, of course; for I expect you to make my existence much more happy, as I should hope to make yours more bright and promising. That's all. I am dying to make the fairylike transformation on a girl already lovely — and surely you are not without ambition!"

Thurley smiled. "It is a fairy story, isn't it — the way it comes, and all? It sounds — too good for — New York city, shall I say? And coming like this — to me —"

"Fate, my dear, believe me. How, otherwise, should you happen to be sitting in the park when Robley

Stuyverant comes along and breaks his big, strong wrist?"

Thurley colored an exquisite tint. "I hope his wrist is better — I mean — it was really terrible."

Alice arched her brows. "He called the incident a 'favor of the gods.' He is nearly insane to meet his Princess again."

The red fairly surged to Thurley's cheeks at this, and down all her ivory neck. "You — he — I'd be expected to meet him, as you said?"

"Naturally. His enthusiasm, I confess, incubated my resolve to find you if I could. But don't forget what I named as my conditions. I couldn't permit you to engage yourself for a year, not even to Robley, after all that romantic meeting. You see, I am very scheming, after all."

"Oh!"

Alice rose. "Will you come to-night with the Major, or with me?"

Thurley's excitement returned. "Did I promise to come?"

"To look us over, certainly. Wear anything you like, my dear. We three shall be alone." She held out her hand as before, and smiled with a charm of her own that Thurley knew was honest. "You can think things over rapidly, from all I learn of your character. Perhaps you can give me your answer to-night."

Thurley's smile was a trifle timid. "Perhaps."

The older woman quietly took her other hand. There was something wistful in the look she bestowed on the eyes so deeply brown. "If you make up your mind to come, you'll call me Alice?"

"If I come."

Alice gave added pressure to her hands. "I think you'll be a little more comfortable if you come with the Major," she concluded. "We'll consider that arranged. Till then, my dear, good by."

"Good by," said Thurley, and followed to the door.

Alice turned and kissed her suddenly. "There! I simply couldn't help it!" she laughed, her own face flushing girlishly. "I know we are going to be friends."

Then she went, and Thurley stood there marveling, a thrill subtly creeping to her heart.



## CHAPTER VIII

### WANTED, A DISCOVERY

THE transformation was complete, the most absolute, magical transformation one could possibly imagine. And still Thurley hardly believed it had come for more than one midnight hour. It seemed impossible for such a dream to assume substantiality. Its vanishment, like Cinderella's coach and steeds, would have seemed the natural incident when twelve solemn strokes should sound from some darkened tower.

That first exciting dinner with Alice and the Major was already two days old, its impression embossed on Thurley's malleable mind as a bas-relief uplifted from her former plane of existence. But to-night — this first real occupancy of her wondrous cocoon from which she was destined to emerge into new and startling loveliness — this was too magical for credence!

Alice herself had brought her to the suite of rooms henceforth to be sacred to her uses. Alice herself had appointed two smart, deferential maids to attend her slightest needs. Her old world had slunk away like smoky fog, — old labors, old apartments, old gowns, and hats and shoes. There was nothing left to suggest her past attachments, save two or three trinkets of gold and her mother's diamond ring.

She stood at last alone with her thoughts, robed in a faintly shimmering gossamer of night apparel, delightedly regarding her "home." Her maids had pre-

pared her for retirement and left her in possession, mistress of her warmly glowing kingdom.

Yet she dared not and could not experience a sense of ownership either in the walls and furnishings or in all the dainty finery, exquisite gowns, the costly furs and sparkling gems, already secured and bestowed upon her as the "mere first requisites of her wardrobe," new purchases which Alice had assured her were soon to be supplemented properly, when modistes, tailors, and others of their ilk should have time to prepare things to order.

A feeling of strangeness pervaded the thrills she underwent as she once more explored her gilded bower by herself. From the splendid spaciousness and delicate perfections of her drawing room, through her lofty blue and gold chamber and her wholly enchanting dressing room, to the fairy grotto of a bath and back, she moved with the lingering appreciation of a Princess who, after long banishment, is once more restored to her own. She opened the wardrobes one by one and gazed at their treasures in joy. The jewels that gleamed from her golden casket were reflected brilliantly in the rapture of her eyes.

All her old dreams of the conquest of Manhattan had contained no such element as this. It had faded like a tawdry thing in the light of this dazzling reality. All the old resentments felt against Acton Gaillard and his sort, together with desire for swift retaliation, had gone with the grimy fog of former days. Exultation and pure girlish ecstasy, with love of all the lovelier phases of existence, possessed and thrilled her being. It was hers, this world of beauty.

Perhaps for an hour she moved about the place, now

sitting in a thronelike chair, now merely standing in the center of a room to contemplate its charms. At last she pushed a button in the paneled wall, and the soft rose lights of her fairyland faded in their crystal spheres.

A mellowed twilight crept through the windows westward, where they overlooked Fifth Avenue. She went there happily, and by habit ran up the shades. Below, the pavement dully reflected the scattered lights widely dotting out the long perspective. A hansom went by, the horse's hoofs musically clop-clopping as he trotted briskly toward the Plaza.

Across the way loomed the wall and the half-denuded trees of Central Park. Here and there a star-like lamp glowed steadily between dark masses of foliage, increasing the sense of peace. The sky was clear, and the constellations swung brilliantly across the firmament, lustrous with cosmic magnificence.

But Thurley's eyes beheld again a man falling forward in the rain. She saw him presently seated by her side, and the pulse of a mighty motor shook her being. She wondered—and she wondered. At last, with a sigh of new-found rapture, she returned to the wholly intoxicating luxury of her couch. What a pity it seemed to waste a moment of a world so marvelous in sleep's effacing oblivion!

Yet when she awakened by the morning light, the wonder was fresher than before. She had barely entered the hallway of miracles to which, in the way of her kind, she would presently grow amazingly accustomed.

Nevertheless, for the two or three days next succeeding her emotions of bewilderment increased. Neither

her mind nor her nature could grasp the full significance of Alice Van Kirk's prodigious wealth. She could not behold the prodigality of spending upon herself and avoid feeling staggered and appalled.

Alice induced her gently, with skill and finesse of the utmost art, toward the nonchalance, poise, and deportment of those long accustomed to the favors of the gods. Her pupil was apt and pliant. Her natural grace, plus her exceptional powers of observation and intuition, rendered Thurley instantly amenable to the slightest desires and pressures of the woman now molding her anew.

That certain regal essence of her being, naturally inherent, flowered in exquisite charm. Graciousness claimed her for its own. Her beauty was heightened and refined. Over coachmen and footmen who were assigned with her own particular carriages to her needs she assumed a monarchical proprietorship that delighted their very souls.

By every possible device of modesty and retirement, Alice conducted this schooling of her Princess, as it were, behind the scenes. Not even Robley Stuyverant was aware of his abetter's find. He had fretted, stormed, implored the Fates and Alice, and run amuck through drawing rooms and the first of the season's functions, without, of course, so much as encountering a single person who had ever seen or heard of the girl he sought.

Meantime, rumors that a Princess of extraordinary beauty, wealth and cleverness was actually adrift, incognito, in America, had been credited with truth, despite the fact that all eager swelldom had vainly sought to find her out from somewhat vague descriptions.

She was said to be blond and brunette together, headstrong, entirely cosmopolitan, weary of Europe, inclined toward an American alliance, and the promised guest of some woman once met abroad.

To Alice Van Kirk these stories came, and met exceptionally cordial hospitality. Such excitement as her nature and spirit permitted increased in her being every hour. At the end of a week of Thurley's tuition the well-known Van Kirk impatience chafed, no longer, however, at the mere delay in presenting of her protégée, but instead at her own fastidiousness of choice in means whereby to promote the impending discovery to best advantage.

The Horse Show was a week away, the opera nearly two. Before the former and the Metropolitan opening, Thurley should already be heralded or much valued time would be lost. A veritable triumph at Madison Square was the première of Alice's demands of the situation, such power would the victory bestow.

She dared not jeopardize a structure built upon the frailty of this new experiment by undue haste, unwisdom, or self-started claims concerning Thurley. The cleverness of her intentions was worthy of her well-known ingenuity and clarity of vision. Hence the worry that possessed her day and night as she pummeled her wits to meet the crucial moment and event of launching Thurley forth upon a social startled world that would think it instantly pierced her identity for itself.

She thought and planned till she was nearly ill. In vain! Some hazy scheme of inviting Robley Stuyverant to a motor ride in the park and picking Thurley up at the spot where the young man's wrist had

been broken, was the nearest approach she could possibly invent by way of something "accidental." It met her requirements in romanticism, even perhaps too well. It lacked, however, in its powers for publicity. She dismissed it with the rest.

Saturday morning arrived, a day more brilliant than the sunniest hour of the day when Robley broke his wrist. Alice awoke in a fever, induced by tossing in sleeplessness as she thought of the problem she must meet.

There was no further time to be lost — and nothing had come to her assistance. Then Thurley, plus her helpful fate, brought it all to crystallization — unguessed by Alice at the time.

"Oh, Alice," she said at breakfast, "what a gorgeous day! Couldn't we order the horses for a gallop in the park?"

Alice avidly welcomed the suggestion. "Why, yes, by all means, Thurley, order yours for this afternoon. I ride like a cat on skates, you know; but I'd rather you went than not."

"Oh!" said Thurley. "I hoped we might go together."

Alice smiled at her archly. "Even though you might perchance meet a motorist, disabled and forlorn? Fiddlesticks! Order your horse for three, and James to trail behind."

## CHAPTER IX

### REVELATIONS IN A RUNAWAY

MORE furiously than ever before had James trailed that afternoon. Never had a day been finer, the assemblage of carriages and riders in the park more brilliant, or Thurley more alive with the effervescence of youth and the fire of joy.

Her horse, a superb Arabian, glossy as the sun itself, and darkly red as the richest autumn foliage, was ignited by her spirit. He pranced, cavorted, arched his neck, in pride of the dainty mistress on his back, and ached for a chance to let out his powers for once and prove himself worthy of her love.

Already she loved him in a riotous mood that extended to the ruddy world in its regal splendors of color. Not since a day in the faraway spring had she been thus enthroned in a saddle. Her spirit vaulted tempestuously, ahead of the galloping steed. She gloried in the rush and motion, the exhilarating air with its touch of frost hurled upon her by her cleaving through to new-found avenues of pleasure.

She rode like a splendid young valkyr, welded by skill and sheer abandon into wondrous unity with the animal excited and delighted by her weight. It was only wild riding in the sense of its utter freedom, beauty, and spontaneity. It was rhythm and spirit and courage, exemplified in her absolute confidence and passion for living and motion.

She dashed through one of the bridle paths that par-

allel a drive, like a vision of velocity and beauty. From a hundred glinting carriages, flinging back the sun rays from varnish, silver, and burnished animals, a wondering procession of wealth's spoiled darlings paid her the tribute of their stares, their gasps, curiosity, and admiration, — some for the marvel of her coloring and grace, the proud, handsome face, exquisitely regal, some for such horsemanship as the park had rarely seen, and some for her daring and apparent recklessness, — the men and women drifting by on the tide of luxury and ease were magnetized despite themselves, while Thurley was completely unaware.

She raced from their sight like a fragment from an epic of rapture. Her joy in her Amazonion liberty and flight was a thing to be felt by all who saw, so potent were its radiant emanations. Round the bend, with James in desperation spurring at the rear, she encountered a party of equestrians, men and women, posting along like a dozen conventional automata invented for mechanical riding. With one accord they turned to watch her pass. Beyond them she approached and overtook three women, riding in a group.

The farther she rode the sweeter grew the breath that swept from the autumn perfumed trees and the wilder became the answer of her spirit. It seemed like a ride through amber, gold, and flame. Every vista looming ahead in her path seemed a red-lit glow of welcome. Then the way once more drew in abreast a drive, where again the pageantry of wealth rolled languorously by.

Broughams, coupés, glinting automobiles, hansoms, barouches, and children's phaetons, decorously winding the highways of indulgence, and flinging off their lar-



gess of light from a thousand flashing spokes, moved in two opposing streams. Again, as before, the homage of their seldom-stirred attention was paid to Thurley, romping past. A hundred scions of the house of ease inquired who she was.

Then, from one of the carriages, occupied solely by one old woman and a broad, athletic young man, came a note of surprise and gladness which started as if to become a shout and ended much suppressed. The eager young man half rose in his seat, showing his arm in a sling.

It was Robley Stuyverant, once more desperately hoping for the vision of a face which at last he had seen once again. He saw her skimming lightly by, with never a turn of her head, her thoroughbred a-tingle in his glad response to the beating and wish of her heart. He wanted to cry out mightily, to turn and pursue, to halt her somewhere — anywhere — for a moment of looking in her eyes.

She was gone almost before his thoughts could arrange themselves in order. Stifling an utterance akin to a groan, he sank once more on the cushions, and instantly recovered sufficient of his natural acumen to gaze out again for Thurley's attendant.

"Great roaring ghosts!" he exclaimed aloud as James went feverishly past. He had recognized Alice's man.

A mad, unreasoning impulse to escape his present obligations with the quiet old woman at his side and hasten pellmell to the Van Kirk mansion was the initial suggestion in his brain. Then he knew that no one would be found at home, and could only hope that Thurley might cross his orbit again.

It seemed likely that she would cross every orbit in

the world. While for herself it was merely the wine of unbridled delight that increased in her nature as she rode, with the horse it was madness that was growing. He too was aflame with the love of speed, the tang of nude nature in the air, the urging of joy-heated blood. She slowed him at the crossing of a pedestrians' path, and he quivered with impatience to be off again, to delight alike the kindred spirit on his back and the riot in his veins.

She lifted the reins, and he was swiftly galloping, dipping to earth like a swallow. They were headed south. The park's length northward as far as the riding pathway went, and the width of it westward, had been rapidly traversed. They would be obliged to make its round a half-dozen times to satisfy Thurley's craving for the joy.

The graveled way swung close to the side of the western drive, where only a few of the chariots of wealth and fashion paraded. A number of rapidly moving automobiles were here, almost entirely in possession of the road. It was near the spot where Robley Stuyverant had fallen in the rain, and Thurley had been launched by kindly Fates.

A racing car came swiftly down the stretch, its reckless driver willfully and wantonly shattering the most liberal of the speed regulations. Abreast of Thurley's Arabian, already strung to the highest nervous tension, the fellow suddenly opened his muffler cutout, and his great motor roared with deafening percussions.

Instantly bolting, after one wild leap aside, the animal under Thurley flattened oddly down above the earth, already streaming grayly away beneath him, and ran with all his might.

His speed was terrific, — not in the motion, which .

had steadied to a strangely easy undulation, but because of the bite of impinging air, the dizzying chaos of trees and park features stampeding by in confusion, and the sense of lost mastery, lodged in the girl's delighted being but a moment earlier.

She knew she was helpless to control the passion of the thoroughbred, whose bone and sinew and fiery blood had burned for this moment of delirium. She was not alarmed. The sensation engendered by the madness of speed aroused a new sort of pleasure, a welcoming to recklessness, almost a wish for still more velocity forward. She knew she could not ride like this for long without gravest dangers. They were dangerous alike to herself and to everything near her.

She gathered the reins more closely in and applied all the strength of her fine young arms to break his mad flight with the bit. But the bar of steel was clamped in his teeth, where resistance only whetted him the more.

A shout went up from someone in the road. It swept to the rear like a wail. Ahead was a turn of the bridle path, and beyond it—she knew not what. More yells and shouts came weirdly through the air that was storming roarily by. The horse responded, if possible, with added speed.

Rocks, a bridge, a group of people walking, who barely reeled back from the animal's course in time to escape his flying hoofs, made a series of blurs in the panoramic rush that the path's two sides had become.

Pale with the chill of biting air and likewise with her cool comprehension of the menace of every movement, Thurley felt the inward lean as the flight-crazed

Arabian took the curve and plunged on in something akin to panic rapidly succeeding all things else that might have been present in his nature before. Then her heart turned over like a helpless bell swung too far out for its balance. The road was almost wholly occupied by ten or more riders, women and men, walking their mounts in the same direction she was racing!

She could not cry out a warning. In a blinding conviction of disaster, she could only tug with sturdier might at the reins, already tight as fiddlestrings, and hope to steer for a foot-wide space between the nearest riders.

But someone screamed, some woman, sitting on an iron bench that overlooked the scene. In utter fright the riders scattered right and left to let the comet through. Then two of the men, well mounted and cool, spurred hotly in pursuit. They were joined a hundred yards below by a mounted policeman, who swung forth, already at speed, before Thurley had won to his post.

He and the men from the pleasure group fell behind with the trees and rocks and wind as the thoroughbred warmed to his work.

By then the cries from a score of throats had alarmed the park for a mile. The fright and excitement increased apace, as four mad riders hurtled on, Thurley white and rigid in the lead.

James had been hopelessly outdistanced in the first few hundred yards. Hoofbeat and screams that pierced the air sounded mad warnings down the course. The bridle path dived beneath a bridge that spanned the western drive of fashion. A hundred frightened women saw the runaway dynamic of power flashing his

muscles like engine parts in the sunlight's streaming rays, with the stiff, upright figure of the white-faced girl unflinchingly applying strength and nerve and courage to the task of subduing his madness.

A second and third of the mounted police whipped into the vortex at the curve that swung on the pathway's eastward trend. Over, across to a dangerous junction of riders' path and driveway, shot the eager horse, intent upon besting the animals in pursuit. But past the policemen and past his companion crept one of the men from the group in the rear, slowly but steadily gaining on the hard-breathing bay that Thurley guided.

And she, in the meantime, finally provoked into new resolve to snatch back the mastery tautly held before, lost patience with the senseless horse and with it all comprehension of her danger.

"Boy," she said, "behave yourself. You ought to be ashamed."

Abruptly loosing both the reins, she gave a sudden, powerful jerk at the right one, wrapped about her hand. Instantly sawing no less stoutly at the other, she felt the bit give back to its place against the tender portion of the creature's jaw, which was then subjected to the splendid strength that the moment lent to her arms and body.

She was sawing him back to another thought than that of wild stampede, with impatience that bled him at the mouth, as they dashed less swiftly toward the junction. More cries ahead were mingled with the distant shouting at the rear. The driveway of fashion began to clog with vehicles, halted in confusion and affright.

Then up from the rear shot the rider who had headed all but Thurley's thoroughbred. He too rode superbly, and was mounted on a powerful black, a blue grass product of the racing blood, without a peer in the city.

Nevertheless, when the rider's hand projected forward at the last and clutched Thurley's horse by the bit, she had already calmed his raging fire and had pulled him down to sidewise locomotion.

The group swung sharply inward to the left, and Thurley's bay, resentful of the needless interference, flung outward again to the right. The saddle, loosened by the strain and pressure of the race, turned from the change of Thurley's momentum and threw her easily off on her side in the gravel.

She was neither bruised nor scratched; but groans and cries arose from the breathless audience in the halted procession on the drive. Policemen and the others, distanced in the mad pursuit, rode hotly to the scene, even as Thurley sprang to her feet and took her horse in hand.

The only man who had ridden with sufficient speed to be in at the crucial moment had dismounted. He was young, smooth shaven, and ruddy. He had snatched off his cap and was soberly regarding the wondrous surge of color returning to Thurley's cheeks, when another man came running there from the drive's congested traffic.

It was Stuyverant, white and excited. "Princess!" he cried.

Thurley turned, beheld him, and flushed to the tips of her ears.

"Here, give me that horse," said one of the mounted

policeman, now on foot beside the others. "The young lady might have been killed."

"Nonsense!" said Thurley. "He's calm enough now. If someone will please adjust the saddle —"

"Are you hurt?" said Stuyverant, crowding to her side. "Is there anything I can do?"

James, other riders, and a dozen men, together with added numbers of policemen, arrived there in all manner of haste. Thurley foresaw interference and annoyance. She turned to Stuyverant gladly, as to one she felt she knew.

"I'm not even scratched," she told him in her spirited manner. "He was stopping. He's not excited now. If the saddle hadn't turned, there would be no need for anyone to help."

The rider who had caught at her horse's bit at last reddened more deeply beneath the sun-tan of his face. "I'm sorry if you think I interfered — was the cause —"

"You were very kind," said Thurley radiantly, her smile restoring his exultation in the moment. "Perhaps if you'll help me now to — Oh, here is James. The saddle, James, will you please put it on a little tighter?"

"Look here, Miss," said the policeman who was holding his own fine animal as well as the quivering bay, "I don't want to make you no trouble, nor nothing like that, but this horse here is excited. He ain't fit for no lady to ride."

He too received a smile. "You wouldn't arrest him for a little run like that? If you please, I think I know him best. I'll give you my word he'll behave."

Stuyverant longed for the use of his injured arm.

He thought of another expedient. "You wouldn't think of riding him again — not this morning!" he said, hopelessly convinced that a girl of Thurley's spirit would think of nothing else. "Let me offer to take you home. The carriage is here."

James was adjusting the saddle stolidly.

The rider who had all but effected a rescue fancied he read the one desire in Thurley's courageous nature. "The horse was under control entirely," he said. "I'm sorry I interfered." He was not; he was riotously glad. "I'm sure the lady may be trusted to ride him safely home."

"Well now, I don't," said the officer.

"No, no!" said a man in the gathering crowd. "It's madness — a beast like that!"

Thurley had heard only the man who had ridden to her side and helped to dislodge her from her seat. She turned to him appealingly. "Not home — I'd rather not go home just yet. I do wish people wouldn't act so seriously! Please help me go on as I was!"

Stuyverant was desperate. The policeman was afraid of troubles that might still develop.

"You see, Miss," he started, above the murmur and protest of the crowd, "a horse like this —"

"Here, Officer," muttered the ruddy young rider of the black, slipping a bill into the big hard hand of the law's representative, "just scatter the crowd. With a dozen of you chaps watching him now, the horse can do no harm." He saw that James had concluded the readjustment of the saddle. "May I assist you up?" he added to Thurley, offering his card. "It's the least I can do, after helping to bring you down."

Thurley smiled her acceptance of his offer, and re-



ceived the card. Already the policemen were moving back the crowd and heading other horsemen from the scene. A number of those who were nearest the path saw Thurley once more mounted on her throne. Stuyverant pressed in once again and halted in front of the restless horse, looking up beseechingly.

"May I not see you soon?" he said. "If I hadn't been crippled like this —"

Thurley looked down at his upturned face with glory and mischief burning together in her eyes. "If you can find me — yes." She did not know that he had recognized her man.

Then James released the thoroughbred and she galloped quietly away.

## CHAPTER X

### A ROYAL RÔLE

A FRAGRANT, spicy furore swept searchingly through swelldom, stirring its units to the depths. Whence sprang the intelligence no one knew; for a score of prominent personages claimed, almost simultaneously, to have made the discovery that Princess Thirvinia, missing from Europe and said to be traveling or visiting incognito in America, was the guest of Alice Van Kirk.

The tropic storm, involving curiosity, envy, incredulity, and the most intense concern, raged with its own sort of languorous violence throughout the length and breadth of the upper social stratum. On orchid's breath and on jeweled wings the word was sped of the beauty and daring of the glorious girl who had come to masquerade among them.

A hundred or more of the world's elect, who knew and spoke with authority, had seen the headstrong horsemanship, the runaway, the fall, and Thurley's return to her horse's back, of which all the avenue was talking. A dozen remembered to have caught a recent glimpse of Alice Van Kirk with a girl extraordinarily handsome. One or two men had heard Robley Stuyverant call her Princess as he ran to her assistance. The wonderful contrast of her golden hair, her chocolate eyes, and the darkness of her brows, had escaped not one who had seen her.

Excitement, speculation, and a thousand forgotten intentions to cultivate Alice Van Kirk sprang into immediate activity — and the fondest of Alice's social hopes had been granted well nigh instantaneous fulfillment.

Thurley had been home an hour, and Alice barely twenty minutes, when the first delighted buzz of the oncoming storm penetrated the quiet magnificence of the palace on the avenue and warned the expectant hostess. It entered by means of the 'phone — a woman's voice, solicitous, endearing, protesting a never forgotten friendship, and inquiring as to any possible injuries inflicted on Mrs. Van Kirk's beautiful guest by her accident in the park.

"It is like your enterprise, my dear, to harbor an errant Princess," added the woman caressingly. "It justifies the faith I have always reposed in your originality and leadership. It is Princess Thirvinia, of course?"

"Has anyone heard me say so?" answered Alice evasively, "or anything at all?"

"My dear," said the friend, "I have always praised your discretion, and now you compel me again. I thought perhaps you and your charming protégée might join my little informal dinner party at the Plaza on the eighth and help to fill my Horse Show box in the evening. May I count upon you, dear?"

"I fear it would hardly be safe," said Alice, and she presently added, "Good by."

She hastened at once to Thurley's presence, for need of a clarifying conference. She appeared quite calm, even languid, as she came in, tall, erect, and almost military in her strong resemblance to the Major; but

excitement was burning in her bosom. Accounts of Thurley's ride had been sufficiently agitating; but this was of vastly different order.

"Dear child," she said, employing an appellation recently born of her swiftly increasing fondness for the girl, "I wonder if you realize all that happened to-day in the park?"

Thurley, who was resting after a session with her maids, looked up at Alice inquiringly, a serious pucker on her brow. They had spoken of the accident before.

"Why — not if it's anything dreadful. Nothing, I hope, to give you worry," she said. "You haven't decided, after all, that I'm not to ride him again!"

"It isn't that; but, as for worry, judge for yourself," said Alice with a smile. "You convinced the world — our world, at least — that Princess Thirvinia, living for a time incognito, was here in New York as my guest."

Thurley was grave and flushed for a moment, then burst into laughter, deliciously fresh. "How utterly ridiculous! It's perfectly absurd! I wondered why Mr. Stuyverant should call me — But of course they will soon understand. No one could be long deceived by anything so ludicrous."

"That is not altogether so certain," Alice answered seriously. "What was it Robley Stuyverant called you, my dear?"

"Why — 'Princess,' I think." Her cheeks took on a tint of embarrassment and pleasure. "Of course he doesn't know my name! but why he should think — If he is the only one who thinks so — so peculiarly —"

"He is not, dear child. He is one of scores who are quite convinced they have shown tremendous acumen

in making the same discovery. Doesn't the notion rather amuse and please you?"

"Why, but — think of daring to let them — of posing, I mean — and being revealed, and all that! It might be amusing for a day, of course, especially with all you are doing — giving me — making of me, here. But, Alice, to dare to claim — Don't you see how you — how I — both of us would appear the minute the facts came out?"

Alice nodded. "Precisely, my dear Thurley. And that is exactly why we do not intend to make the slightest claim or pretense to anything of the sort. But do you think of any good reason for revealing anything at all? Should we try to disabuse the minds of any of these people who flattered themselves by their cleverness in discovering the marked resemblance between yourself and Princess Thirvinia?"

Thurley looked at her sharply, her eyes grown grave at once. "Do you mean —"

"I mean, my dear, that if we denied the soft impeachment we should only convince them the more. I mean it would certainly amuse us both and afford us immeasurable entertainment to permit them to think what they please, — to assert nothing, deny nothing; merely permit events to shape themselves as they will. Wouldn't that please and amuse you, dear? Couldn't you play the rôle?"

"The rôle of a — Princess?"

"The rôle of a lovely young girl whose identity is wholly unknown. If you fit the mold of a Princess, I should call it singularly good fortune."

Thurley burned warmly again, with innate modesty and with irrepressible delight in the thought, with its

attendant possibilities. "But I — I shouldn't know the very first thing of the way a Princess behaves or talks or anything. And Princess Thirvinia must be a German, or something like it, of course."

"And you once taught French and German, and told me you lived three years on the Continent. I have heard you speaking both languages to your maids. In addition to that, you must certainly see that Princess Thirvinia, attempting to conceal herself, or to masquerade in Manhattan, would naturally make every possible effort to act as unlike a royal personage as possible. Oh, you could do it, my dear, if that was our desire. But at most I have only suggested the amusement of maintaining absolute secrecy, or mystery, as to who and what you are, and permitting our clever acquaintances to do the rest for themselves. You will do this much to please me, I am sure."

Thurley regarded her soberly. "You desire it very much?"

"It would please me greatly, amuse me, afford me new interest in life."

Thurley was silent for a moment, her face flushed and paler by turns. Slowly the brightest sparkle of a smile and flash of jewel brightness came to her eyes. "It would be a lark — good fun."

"You'll do it, dear?" Alice was far more eager than accent or movement could possibly indicate.

Thurley was instantly reflective. "What would the rôle involve? How should I have to begin? You see, I don't in the least know what I should have to do."

"Do almost nothing," Alice informed her sagely. "Let people make fools of themselves — if that is their whim. It's so much more complete. We shall simply

evade and parry all questions, make no claims, and rather avoid the subject than court it. All I require of you, my dear, is that you make no disclaimers to anyone; that you reveal nothing at all from the past; and that you spend money regally, continue lovely, and avoid all heart entanglements for at least a year. You know I asked that before, and received your acceptance of the condition. You are free, of course, to conduct all the mild flirtations you please. I really wish you to be royally happy and free."

"Oh, Lordy!" said Thurley girlishly, her face fairly beaming with dimpling smiles. "It's so comical! Do you really think I'm worth it, think I shan't make a failure of it all?"

She had risen in her new excitement of spirit, and Alice rose to take her two warm hands.

"Dear child," she said, "I don't believe there's an ounce of failure in your composition. If you wish to know, I think it rather your natural right to be an 'American Princess.'" She kissed her honestly, adding, "I have always felt I'd like to make one, my own way."

Thurley smiled with tender wistfulness. "I'm so afraid I may have to wake up! I was never loyal to a fairy queen before. It's so odd to have to believe in fairies now!"

"But you do. It's a bargain, then, my harsh conditions and all?"

"Why — I suppose so. It could do no harm to anyone in the world. But suppose that someone — anyone I used to know — should find me out and explode the little fiction?"

"What fiction?" said Alice. "You see, my dear, we are putting forth no fiction. We must both remem-

ber that. Besides, you are rather far removed from all your older life and associations. Let's consider the agreement settled and begin to enjoy the play."

"I couldn't help enjoying the situation," Thurley admitted. "I'm afraid I'm hopelessly human."

"Thank Heaven!" said Alice. "Let's go down. I hear the 'phone."



## CHAPTER XI

### CONFIRMING A RUMOR

ALL evening the telephone was jangling and the wire was warm with invitations, declarations of friendship, and solicitude for the nerves of the royal little rider who had been all but thrown in the park. Throughout all swelldom the silvery alarms were tinkling, some as bald warnings to beware of sham, some in sheer trepidation of spirit, and some as a mere relief to beings hopelessly burdened with ennui.

On the following day, which was Alice's afternoon at home, the stir and the test began. Fifty or more of Gotham's elect, including delegates from the sharpest, the wealthiest, and the most inquisitive cliques, remembered that attentions had long been due to Alice Van Kirk and arrived to meet their obligations.

Stuyverant came at four, only to find himself helplessly isolated from the Princess by others more prompt than himself. He had never thought her so regally dainty, so altogether irresistible and exquisite, as he found her to-day when she gave him her hand the moment when Alice formally made them acquainted.

She was introduced merely as Miss Thurley, and not by the slightest sign or hint was the claim to royalty admitted. No vision more girlishly lovely, sincere, or disarming than she presented, there by Alice's side, had ever been known in all Manhattan. To those of the keenly astute frame of mind who addressed her in

French or German she replied in their chosen tongue with piquancy and ease that almost invariably shamed their somewhat puny and unpracticed accomplishments in Continental languages.

The very evasions and faint denials by which Alice parried the bolder assertions that Thurley had been instantly recognized and might as well be confessed, only served to strengthen the conviction as to Thurley's royal origin. It was all adroit, tactful, insidious; and it met its just reward. Those who had come surcharged with doubt and ready to prick the bubble of Alice Van Kirk's latest triumph, were the first to be self deluded, and hence the wonder grew.

A meager five minutes was the utmost that Stuyverant and Thurley could manage to detach in which to be even approximately alone. He was simply nearer to her side than anyone else as she sat in a corner of the room.

He moved a trifle closer and lowered his voice. "Did you think I shouldn't find you yesterday, Miss Thurley, when you gave me permission to try?"

She met the ardor of his gaze with candid interest, noting the change that absence of pain had wrought upon his face and mentally approving his finely chiseled features, the healthy glow of his color, and the steady level of his warm gray eyes.

She laughed. "Did I appear to stop and think at all? You haven't spoken of your wrist. I hope it's mending rapidly."

His eyes were shining. "I still prefer someone else to drive the car. Will you sometime permit me to thank you properly?"

"Would it be so improper now?"

He met her merry glance undaunted. "It would be a sacrilege — in the presence of all these persons. Of course you're aware they are simply a lot of self-appointed appraisers — and I'm sure you know I am not."

"I must be very knowing," said Thurley, "to know so much so soon."

"It's the third time we've met," he answered. "There is always a charm in threes."

Her eyes showed mock dejection. "Oh, isn't that too bad? You may wish never to disturb the charm again!"

He was equal to the quip. "It can never be disturbed, once established like this. In fact, as soon as you took the wheel that day in the park, it was complete."

"I feared it," she answered, — "complete, finished, labeled, and laid away, to be forgotten."

He was nonplussed only for a moment. "I can see you were never a boy when the jam was labeled and laid away — to be remembered." He glanced up quickly where one of the maids had admitted new callers at the door. "Good Heavens!" he added, beholding two exceedingly ample women surging in majestically, "more old Dreadnoughts! I wanted to ask —"

But Alice was coming.

Thurley rose, not only to meet the imposing visitors, but also a man in their company.

For a moment she wondered, almost in fear, where the eyes of this man might have confronted hers before. Then she knew him, — the rider encountered in the park, he who had raced to halt her horse and helped her to her sudden dismounting. His name was Kelsey Woods.

"Shamelessly glad to see you again," he informed her with pleasant boldness of candor. "Sorry not to find you riding out to-day."

Then his eyes came to rest for a second on the face of Robley Stuyverant, heading for Alice Van Kirk. Their glances met and exchanged some manner of challenge that their formal bows made little attempt to disguise.

Three minutes later, when Lady Honore Calthorp, and young Count José Viziano y Fiaschi, the fiery Spanish-Italian duelist and Romeo of numerous European capitalists, made their appearance, Alice's cup was filled with a violence almost alarming.

"Ah, Mam'selle!" said the Count almost instantly on his presentation to Thurley, his voice reminiscent of Vesuvian flames and lavas. "In St. Petersburg I die three time to have this honor — mine at last!" and he kissed her hand with Italian fervor and Spanish grace, cracking his heels together energetically as he bent his supple waist. "At last my soul is in flight above the clouds! — but you do not recall you have seen me, no!"

"I — I'm afraid I do not," said Thurley, unprepared for such a demonstration. "I'm sure I should remember."

"*Valgame Dios!*" he answered from his altitude above the clouds. "You have only changed to become more lovely."

Then he met the cold American stare of Stuyverant's blue-gray and Woods' light greenish eyes, and a little comprehended that the course even of a Romeo's ardor may not be so smooth as milk.

Thurley escaped with a surge of relief, to the placid stolidity of Lady Honore Calthorp's presence, and be-

gan to wonder how the game on which she had entered would end.

It had only begun. The afternoon was a calm, unexcited prologue merely of the complications, rivalries, shocks, and surprises already mustered, out beyond, to procession into and through her life, newly launched in its royal career.

Conventionality cleared the house within the ensuing hour; but nothing could clear the pathway reaching out ahead, where its windings and grades, its rocky slopes and grassy reaches, were alike obscured in the veils of things that were yet to be, too remote to cast a shadow or reflect the glow of the sun.

In the next few days full confirmation of the fact that Alice Van Kirk's protégée was none other than the royal Princess Thirvinia was vouchsafed from every direction, despite the Van Kirk evasions and Thurley's avoidance of the subject. Besiegers stormed the Fifth Avenue mansion in droves. Friends, admirers, and invitations multiplied appallingly, and then — the Horse Show opened the season of the goddesses of wealth.

## CHAPTER XII

### HORSES AND HUMANS

NEVER had the première of Society's pet function been so brilliant. Never had the gilded hostelrys of Gotham entertained so great a number of guests at Horse Show dinners, nor had special decorations and favors at the gorgeous dining rooms ever been so lavish or so costly. It was the night of the horse and splendor, the splendor of raiment, jewels, and beauty for which American women are famous throughout the world.

The attendance at huge old transformed Madison Square Garden was more brilliant than either the show or the setting. It was late when the boxes began to fill, — the arena boxes, separated from the horses' ring only by the railed-off promenade. Superbly gowned and furred, the women began to arrive at nine, despite the fact that many ring events had been scheduled for an hour earlier. At half-past nine, with six magnificent teams of heavy draft horses proudly entering upon the tanbark, and the boxes practically filled, the band, by mere coincidence, struck up the German national anthem — and Thurley and Alice arrived.

A murmur of excitement, admiration, and homage almost instantly arose. No more exquisitely regal figure had ever graced the garden than Thurley presented, moving slowly with Alice and her party to their box. Never had Thurley's fresh young beauty so

glowed and irradiated charm. She was gowned like a veritable Princess of this fairy court.

With herself and Alice were Lady Honore Calthorp, Major Rutherford of the Seventh British Hussars, the Hon. Miss Dorothy Hedrington, Lieutenant Lee Gehard Curtiss (14th Cavalry, U. S. A.), and his wife, all of whom had comprised the Van Kirk dinner party at the Plaza.

Thurley had never been more happily excited in her life than when, as they reached their box and assumed their seats, the beauty and thrill of it crept to her senses and the wine of it surged in her pulses. She was unaware of a thousand pair of eyes already focused upon her. Her heart was beating to the music; her color was glowing to the softened refulgence of a thousand crystals of flame; her nature was tingling with warmth and delight at the sight of the twenty-four great horses in the ring, six teams of four each, superbly accoutred and arching their necks with conscious pride in their strength and breeding as they moved about on the tanbark of the oval.

Below her were scores of beings of all degrees in the social world. A fringe of men and women, absorbingly interested in horses, and nothing but horses, hung upon the wooden rail about the ring, as children might at a circus. Behind them and frequently mingling with them were men in evening costume and women richly gowned, who represented the sporting element of Gotham's elect. Between these latter and the balustrade of the boxes paraded scores and droves of the curious, frankly inspecting the occupants of favored seats above them.

All sorts and conditions were represented in this

ever-moving procession, from the wealthiest and most select, to the poorest girl worker from some Broadway office, treating herself to this proximity to wealth and the scions thereof.

Far across, and up and down the huge arena, the scores of boxes were filled with the darlings of money and power, and back and forth their occupants were visiting, a hundred already alive with interest at the news that the Princess had appeared.

Robley Stuyverant arrived at the Van Kirk box almost at Alice's heels. He had barely time to pay his respects to the occupants and be formally presented to Major Rutherford and the Curtisses, when the Vesuvian Romeo, Count Fiaschi, likewise arrived, to be followed by young Baron Klimsch, Captain Fowler, Beau Brymmer of the diplomatic service, and a constant stream of eager visitors.

No less than half a dozen boxes were emptied forthwith, as their holders joined the now congesting parade slowly moving by the place where Thurley sat. Amused and too diverted by the horses and pageantry of notables to find conversation with Stuyverant or any others possible, the "Princess" gained in animation momentarily—and her smile became more infectious and winning.

"Ah, Highness," she heard Count Fiaschi murmur in his reckless ardor, "I am dropping from the clouds these days until I see you once again! My wings are your smiles. You will not see me dash to earth with all his rocks? One smile! I soar again! Ah!"

Thurley had smiled, it may not be denied. "You are very considerate," she told him. "You fear the rocks might be broken."



"*Virgen santisima!* No!" he assured her. "My heart!"

She smiled again; and yet he did not soar, but instead edged closer with his chair.

"It is divinity!" he murmured. "It is above Paradise and —"

He did not finish his description. Stuyverant was glowering upon him forbiddingly. How utterly he loathed a being who could bring his grimaces and deportment of courtship to this public theater! But the interruption came from another source.

Kelsey Woods, the dashing horseman of the park, had crowded forward in the press below Thurley's seat and, saluting with his hat, held up his hand for the formal grip that hundreds were exchanging between boxes and parade.

"Began to fear you might not come," he confessed, with his usual candor. "Been watching constantly. I say, I thought I might ask you to ride my hunter Wednesday night, and perhaps drive my hackneys as well. What do you say?"

Thurley appeared all innocence. "All at once, Mr. Woods? Wouldn't it seem an innovation?"

"Did I make it sound like that?" he begged. "Reversion to my English schooling. Shocking habit! But you'll ride the hunter? He's a beauty."

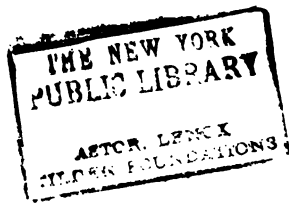
Alice leaned down above the throng. "Kelsey Woods," she said, "please take your temptations to another quarter."

A sudden ripple of applause, as a team of magnificent Norman percherons received the blue ribbon for a first award, startled Thurley to attention on the horses. They were trotting off like big, good-natured



*Stuyverant u as glowering upon him forbiddingly.*

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playfellows of toil, and the girl's softly glowing eyes abruptly focused on a face below, at which she gazed in unexplainable fascination.

The face was that of a woman, a well gowned, aristocratic looking woman, with an air of something distinctly foreign in her composition. She was pale, her face was of an olive tint, and it was large, too large for beauty or anything save a certain sense of strength. It was her eyes, however, that exercised the fascination. They were slightly slanted, exceptionally wide apart, and of the palest, ice blue color imaginable.

Fixed upon Thurley's face with singular intensity, these eyes became for a moment the only visible objects presented to the girl in all the theater of color and motion. They were baleful, poisonous seeming eyes, penetrative and disturbingly insistent in their stare. All their concentrated power appeared to be centered on the girl, who felt herself swiftly losing her sense of joy and partaking of coldness of the nerves.

By an effort Thurley wrenched her own honest gaze from the woman's and smiled up at Stuyverant, standing at Alice's side. In the grateful light he gave her from his warm gray eyes she felt new security, a comradeship that somehow took her instantly back to that day in the park when a fall broke his wrist and placed him for a little in her care.

## CHAPTER XIII

### ELEMENTS OF COMPLICATION

WHEN she glanced again toward the crowds and the ring, the woman of icy eyes had disappeared. By then the nature of the show had undergone a change. The interval between events in the ring was seized upon with astonishing avidity by scores and droves of box-inhabitants, eager to avail themselves of nearer inspection of or an introduction to the royal little person who had come to their show beneath the wing of Alice Van Kirk.

The fortification was besieged. Dozens of the younger men, nearly as many of their elders and women in be vies crowded to the place, numbers to halt in the promenade; but the vast majority to juggle for presentation to the "Princess." It ceased to be a Horse Show and became a royal levee. Confused and excited, but growing momentarily more gracious and girlish, even as she grew more beautiful, with the flush of color in her cheeks, Thurley could barely murmur a conventional formula to each one thus presented and think with terror on the utter impossibility of ever remembering all those names and faces.

Alice Van Kirk, meantime, was hardly less occupied than Thurley to manage her own situation with the diplomatic adroitness demanded by the moment. She was smothered with honors, invitations, and a popular-

ity absolutely overwhelming. A score of attentions and recognitions she coveted were indiscriminately mingled with twice as many more she wished to scorn. The younger men, whom first of all she wished to magnetize, aware that success in her social ambitions would follow where they led, had multiplied to alarming numbers in a flash.

Her triumph was a species of landslide, of inconvenient proportions. She did not know and could not have known at the moment that with all these men it was Thurley's exquisite beauty, her irresistible personality and radiant charm, more than all her advertised royalty of origin, that wrought the magnetic spell. She only saw her protégée growing instantly more and more an object of something akin to social worship, and more and more secure in her hold upon the novelty loving, ennui haunted beings of their world.

The next event in the arena was the judging of five pairs, geldings and mares, shown to phaetons, women to drive. The band was playing selections from the latest musical comedy as the proud, matched animals and their skillful drivers swung briskly in upon the tan-bark ring.

Thurley was instantly all attention as before, from sheer love of horses and their management. Dimly aware that Count Fiaschi, Robley Stuyverant, not to mention the Baron, the Captain, and the Beau, were waging a silent sort of war for a place at her side, she turned from them all to the bright arena, leaning girlishly forward in her fervor.

A man of middle age, with a mustache obviously grown in resemblance to that of Kaiser William, took one keen, scrutinizing inventory of the girl's unusual

features, nodded once as if to himself, and disappeared in the throng. He was the second curious individual who had waited for a clear, unobstructed view of her face for reasons that were not mere curiosity or admiration.

There was still a third such being in the garden, — another woman, one of the humblest of the humble, a worker, out of employment, consumed with love of things in the unattainable highest social stratum, and now far out in the tide of the crush that slowly paraded by the box where Thurley was sitting in her splendor. She was Thurley's cousin. She had seen the "Princess" from across the ring, and, unable to credit her senses or believe it was she, was slowly working forward with the press, fearful lest Thurley might at any moment rise and depart before she could come sufficiently close perhaps to attract her gaze.

Meantime the person with the Kaiser adornment on his upper lip, having cleared the close packed audience before the "royal" box, made rapid progress down the Garden to the rear, where horses in waiting, with carriages, grooms, and footmen, were screened from the general view, and, saluting a tall, whiskered foreigner, stepped nimbly aside to report.

"It is she," he stated, murmuring his statement in German. "I should know her in a million, though I saw her but once at court."

"She saw you? She might have known you!" demanded the other, with evident impatience. "What of that?"

The smaller man shook a violent negative. "She neither saw me nor would she know me by any possibility, though she looked for an hour in my face."

The other turned and struck with his fist in his palm. "The folly, the headstrong folly, of her escapade — and to show herself in public here like this! We are helpless to move. We can only, at most, report."

He started in a feverish stride past carriages and servants, and so, emerging from behind the screen at its opposite end, continued down on the farther side of the oval, making his way to the exit of the garden. Once he paused, with his agent at his heels, to glance half resentfully across the ring at the girl on the opposite side.

"So beautiful, so conspicuous!" he muttered in his throaty German. "The peril, the perpetual disaster, of beauty!" He shrugged his shoulders, continued on and out at the door, and was driven away, still accompanied by his man, in a limousine car that was waiting for him.

Thurley's relative, during this brief period, had wormed her way to a gap in the fringe of people leaning on the rail about the ring, and there she caught at an anchorage from which to make her observations. She was small and insignificant, this poor bit of drift in the daily tides of Gotham, a woman of perhaps thirty-three, rather white of face, slender, and nervous. She bore not the slightest resemblance to Thurley, at whom she was gazing now with faculties utterly bewildered.

In one moment certain, in the next unconvinced, that a being so glorious, so radiant, so obviously one of New York's élite, could possibly have any identity with Thurley Ruxton, she lost all sense of judgment. There were moments when Alice's protégée seemed unmistakably the cousin from New Haven. In the next



she appeared absolutely another individual, not even so remarkably like Thurley, after all.

It seemed, moreover, preposterous that Thurley could have come to this estate. Nothing in reason could account for her elevation thus to such patent favoritism with swelldom's exacting and reluctant monarchs. And then, presently, to the dulled perception of the eager woman's ears came the tag end of a conversation, every part of which she might have overheard. A man was speaking, one hallmarked with patrician manners.

"Yes," he agreed, as if upon mature reflection and estimate, eying Thurley through half-closed lids, as a connoisseur squints at a painting, "she quite fulfills the final requirements in a Princess — the first I ever saw that did. For the most part they're a bally homely lot. Princess Thurvinia — I confess my ignorance of her State; but that hair, that Flemish hair, I should know that in the dark."

Thurley's cousin gazed at the "Princess" with newer interest, all question instantly banished from her mind. She could see it was not Thurley now, and felt herself flattered in that seat of her former doubt that had argued the utter absurdity of such social eminence for the girl who had not so long before taught students in the classic shades of Yale.

But she did not move. She was singularly fascinated by this juxtaposition with royalty. It was almost marvelous just to be granted this fateful opportunity of feasting her eyes and soul, for once, on the beauty and graciousness of one so nobly born and reigning in the court of elegance and wealth presented

here, where all the worth-while world was paying homage.

Attentions to Thurley in the box, indeed, had rendered even casual regard of the horses out of the question. In vain the fair drivers whipped their pairs to speed and high stepping action. It was Thurley's hour, despite herself; and Alice was fairly dazed by the unanimity with which the eager social set was plunging into self delusion.

Events in the ring succeeded one another in a mere routine made lifeless and colorless by the greater magnetism at the box. Thurley had scarcely had time for more than mere quick glances at the horses of the show; and Alice was thinking of the wisdom of retreat.

Fifteen saddle horses for women were brought to the oval, and Thurley wished, with all her heart, she might enjoy them exclusively, and be herself forgotten for a little time in which to catch at her wits.

She turned in her chair, looking out on the ring, and then at the faces closer by. Her glance was caught of a sudden by the white immobility of her cousin's countenance, as the latter stood by the wooden rail, transfixed by delight and adoration.

Instantly a shade of color dropped from Thurley's cheeks, only to rush back as quickly in a hotter, deeper flood of disordered emotions. Her recognition of the small, slender figure had been immediate, and no less swift had been a tumult of conflict in her brain and heart as to what she ought to do. Her impulse prompted her head to nod, her lips to curve in a smile of old affection, and her spirit to burn its lamps of loyalty and welcome in her eyes. Her calculation and un-

derlying consciousness of the obligation due to Alice Van Kirk relentlessly put on their check.

Confused, incapable of weighing a matter so unexpectedly confronting her judgment for decision, she did nothing at all, save to grasp at control of her faculties — and her cousin decided in her stead. Already convinced that she was gazing at Princess Thirvinia, the pale little hero worshiper merely blanched a bit whiter, thus to be detected at her staring, fluttered her eyes in an effort to recover her wavering wits, and turned to the horses in the ring.

Thurley rose and met the solicitous scrutiny of Alice's eyes. She smiled, with a forced restoration of her poise, her one desire now being to escape as soon as possible. "Shall we go?" she said. "It must be nearly over."

"By all means, my dear," Alice answered gladly, and the evening's farewells were quickly and quietly exchanged.

Still in a lingering haze of doubt, unrest, and trifling apprehension lest the presence of her cousin in the town might possibly compromise or even jeopardize her new position in the social world, Thurley followed mechanically where their escorts led the way. Then, out in the marble corridor of the building, facing the draft of November air that swept in through the open doors, she received again a peculiar wireless shock for which she could have supplied no explanation.

That same foreign looking woman of the pale olive face and ice blue eyes was standing over against the wall, her gaze hard set and concentrated on Thurley's striking features. Again that sense of something bale-

ful and menacing tinged the girl's nerves with chill, as she met the glitter of the other woman's scrutiny.

She did not observe a small, dark man, with eyes as shifty as those of a coon, who glanced from herself to the woman by the wall, then leisurely followed from the place.

Almost with the same alacrity with which a carriage attendant on the curb outside summoned Alice's car to receive its passengers, a second such person called up a near-by taxicab, into which the small, dark man was fairly shunted.

When Alice's car rolled up the avenue, the other tagged it unobtrusively at a distance of discretion in the rear.

## CHAPTER XIV

### A TRIUMPH AND A JAR

FOR Thurley the Horse Show was over, while the consequences of her appearance there had only as yet begun.

For the two or three days next ensuing she was dimly aware of a small, gnawing worry that robbed her pleasure of its fullest charm. She wondered a thousand times if she had played the generous, creditable part in withholding her look of recognition from her cousin. Time after time she informed herself that she had followed the only possible course, that no good purpose could have been served by betraying her real identity to one so far removed from herself by everything of life; yet the haunting reflection still remained that her cousin had been denied.

For a much briefer time her mind was concerned with the image of that other woman's face and its insistent eyes. All worries were presently swept away, however, in the wonderful tumult of pleasures and experiences impinging on her changed existence. Magic followed magic, at the conjuring of money and her own inherent charm. Like an avalanche of dream imaginings, all wondrously rendered true, the favors of the gods were tumbling, gliding, and flowing in upon her — wardrobes, jewels, the costliest furs, her own imported car and retinue of servants, and a bank account

of startling proportions, entirely her own and subject only to her regal little will.

She was sought from noon till midnight by a hundred exclusive cliques among the women. She was courted, flattered, worshiped, by a score of young princes of wealth. Into the maelstrom of beings whose sole occupation is to woo, cajole, and entice pleasures to their grasp, she was whirled with dizzying velocity.

Her feeling of security increased. Worries and apprehensions subsided rapidly in the conquering flood of everyday success. Her confidence became established, together with a mastery of herself and the situation, precisely as she felt her sense of mastery over horses and the giant forces of her car.

The opera season opened at the psychological moment when her new assurance had lent the final polish to her girlishly regal ways. The Metropolitan première was a night of dazzling triumph, for Alice as well as her protégée. Neither overdressed nor over jeweled, Thurley was a vision of ethereal beauty and imperial grace, dividing with the wonderful music and power of "Aïda" the honors of the evening.

She was exquisite, as rare as an orchid, and at times as wholly unconscious of her loveliness. She was deeply moved by the searching, voluptuous enchantment of the epic thus uttered forth in melody, and in such mood drifted far from herself and far from the mimic play of which she was the center.

She was watched from afar, or from near at hand, by whole blocks of box occupants, and spectators seated less favorably in the orchestra stalls. Not one of her self created satellites was absent from the house. Count Fiaschi, Woods, Robley Stuyverant, poor, would-

be-busy Willie Stetson, Algy Dearborn of near-fame in limericks, the German nobleman, the Canadian officer, and a baker's dozen of less aggressive and persistent hopefuls were as near her as money and activity could place them.

Not one in all the inventory had been permitted, since the night of the Horse Show, so to ingratiate himself with Alice as to have five whole minutes alone with her monarchical little charge. The pent-up volcanics between them were therefore bordering on a state of eruption and counter eruption more or less menacing to each.

This particular night afforded scant if any opportunity, even to the most sagacious, to steal a march upon his fellow conspirators. Thurley was, as it were, equally divided among them all, a fact affording intense, if only temporary, gratification to at least one little creature, Mildred Gray, who could almost have torn the "Princess" to shreds for having cast her spell, all unwittingly, upon the Willie Stetson elsewhere mentioned.

But that night inaugurated changes. It ignited all the glare and incense of the social ritual, casting a blinding refulgence and an intoxicating fragrance of narcotic essences through all the gilded halls of pleasure. And it struck into being in Thurley Ruxton's nature a tiny spark of wanton joy in her power — a spark that has burned the heart of many of her sex to a cold, black crisp at last.

Something had echoed in her overflattered self the mad desire for wealth, position, and power that had steeled her resolve when Gaillard threw her off, that far-back night in New Haven. It would be so good to

retaliate, to flirt with the men, to urge them on, to play upon their fondest dreams and hopes, only to crush them at the end! It would salve so thoroughly the wounds Acton Gaillard had made in her heart to treat all his kind as he had treated her, as hundreds of his ilk were daily treating the college widows of her town!

She felt as if righteous indignation might almost have been delegated to herself from all college widows — power to punish for the punishments that scores and hundreds had endured. The power was hers at last! Without a realizing sense of all that was occurring, she had achieved at a bound that very position she had coveted so intensely, and resolved to have, on the night of her anguish and her utter mortification.

She did not actually resolve to assume the grim rôle of Nemesis to all the moths already drawn to her light; for a certain heartlessness in such deliberate intent was more or less impossible to her nature. She did, however, breathe fire and excitement in the consciousness of mighty power laid almost unbidden in her grasp. Moreover, she had promised Alice Van Kirk that she would not permit her heart to become seriously entangled for a year. If the men would come, — many of them insincere, self seeking, and scheming, — they could scarcely be so defenseless and trusting as she had one time been. The hour and the world had been laid at her feet — and the thought made her drunk with delight.

She thought of half a dozen men at once with whom a tilt at the game of hearts would be only harmless diversion. She could not shut them from her life, nor think of them seriously for half a moment. She mentally bunched them like asparagus, and tied them about



the waist. There was one, however, not included, either in the group of vegetable sprouts or her half formed intent to enjoy her wondrous power.

The one was Robley Stuyverant, somewhat sacredly set apart. She told herself it was merely for his wrist that he must be spared; but the hour of their meeting and the way thereof was rarely absent from her thoughts.

To-night as the theme of the music and the play entwined a spell of tenderness, romance, and exultation with her thoughts, she could not surrender to a mere desire to exercise a selfish motive. Dreams of her past, some old, some as new as the hour in which she drove Stuyverant's car, crept subtly to her heart and kindled a glow as sweetly wholesome as the fire on a homely hearth.

The hour was one not soon to be repeated, where she hovered like a girl emerging from the trust and innocence of youth to woman's conception of the world. In it were mingled all her old unworldliness and a dawning appreciation of the sovereignty thus magically bestowed upon her being. She loved her new-made-power intensely. She loved the elegance, comfort, and beauty made possible by the life into which, in the argosy of fate, she had drifted thus incredibly.

There was one thing missing only, — someone to whom to tell it all, someone dear enough and near enough to share her joy and the wonder of such an occurrence, someone whom mutual trust and love would single out for such a comradeship that all they knew and felt and hoped must forever be divided between them.

The ghost of Gaillard strayed like a mist through the

glowing halls of her thought. He and she had once been so near this very sort of partnership and trust! A pang and another recurrence of her growing desire to repay his kind succeeded her momentary longing. And then her gaze, which had focused for a moment on the vagueness of dreams, swung out across the brilliant scene presented by the audience, and met the watchful eyes of Robley Stuyverant, seated near-by in a box.

A quaint little exultation leaped in her heart, at the sheer audacity and boldness of love encountered in his glance. It swept her for a moment away with himself to a car in the open park. Then she cast off the charm as she might have cast a chain, the links of which, though golden, lustrous, and light to bear, she would not consent to lock upon her arms.

From box to box her eager attention sped, lingering here and there on the brilliant iridescence of diamonds and pearls that flashed from necklaces, tiaras, and even coronets, where women gowned in bewildering richness and beauty vied with one another in display. And then, as before, sheer ravishment of melody — where the blended perfections of the orchestration uttered the joys and anguishes of souls at the brink of climax — caught up her soul, and she was wafted out on an azure sea where nothing of earth could exist.

She was never able clearly to recall the kaleidoscopic panorama of sensations and emotions suggested, presented, and withdrawn that wonderful night, her first of the kind, which could never be repeated. She touched the heights of ecstasy and was floating blindly across the abyss that yawned below. She realized a little of the triumph that she herself had achieved. For the greater part, however, it was all a blur of pleasure as

dazzling and indefinite as the sun brightly flashing in a mist.

Not even the wondrous supper afterward made a clean cut impression on her mind; except that it, like all the rest, was perfect in its way, with more bright music, people, joy, and irresponsibility.

The one thing of the night destined to remain peculiarly vivid came last of all, in her own boudoir, when she was once more at home. It was merely a letter — from the cousin she had seen by the rail at the Horse Show from her height above the crowd. It had been to New Haven, then to the office of Major Phipps, who had brought it here himself.

With something akin to a chill at her heart, Thurley opened and read the missive. It was brief, a mere recital of the fact that the cousin had recently seen someone who reminded her so much of her one remaining relative that she had to sit down and write. If Thurley was living anywhere within reach, and received this letter, perhaps they could meet.

"I am a little discouraged and lonesome," the letter presently concluded, "and I'm sure it would do me good to see you once again. I often think of you as the only real cheer I have had in many years. I hope this may find you and sufficiently arouse your former affection to make you wish to write at once and arrange a possible meeting with your fond and faithful cousin, EDITH STECK."

To Thurley's own amazement, she could not, or did not immediately decide what course she should adopt. For two or three days the matter drifted; but Thurley did not forget.

## CHAPTER XV

### THE FLAW IN THE GEM

HAD one more element of excitement been required to render the situation breathless with possibilities, it was supplied on the night of the Junior Chrysanthemum Ball, which opened the season of dancing at one of the great Fifth Avenue hotels.

The New York *Evening Star*, in its final edition, came out with a redly blazoned story, announcing not only that Princess Thirvinia was now well known to be disporting herself with royal grace in Gotham, but that recent telegraphic and cable intelligence had established the fact that she had practically run away from her Kingdom, with intent to make an American alliance that should be prompted solely by her heart.

This was not all. Her fiancé, of the blood royal, no less a person than the Duke of Saxe Hertze and Heimer, reported intensely fond of her Ladyship and greatly afflicted by her new adventure and this manifestation of her headstrong nature, had likewise disappeared from the Kingdom of Hertze gotha. And his absence, together with that of the Princess, was causing grave uneasiness at the royal court, despite obvious efforts to conceal the truth of the rumors.

An intensified thrill and tingle shot along the delicate nerves that articulate all swelldom, as this newest sensation was devoured. At twenty dinners that pre-


ceded the dance — marvelous little functions of brilliance and charm — the topic was all of Princess Thirvinia masquerading at Alice Van Kirk's.

New hope had instantly arisen, not only in the breasts of the eligible men, both young and old, but as well in the visions of fond and planning mothers, for whose sons their ambitions soared, if possible, beyond even the pearly gates. Heretofore only vague wonder as to what the visit of the Princess might imply had been practicable. Information that she had come to America seeking a mate of her heart inflamed the wildest aspirations.

By nine o'clock an astonishing number of the guests were present at the decorated ballroom, which art and expense had converted into a veritable bower of roses and orchids. Never had the arrivals been so prompt or the feeling in the air so electrically charged.

At half-past nine Alice and Thurley appeared — and the palpitant sensations increased. Thurley had never been more radiant or winning. From her exquisitely arched little feet to the trembling diamond in her hair, she was the daintiest possible embodiment of loveliness. A rose might, indeed, have chosen her to be its own ambassador, to carry its fragrance, its wine-warm color, and its irresistible appeal to the Court of Beauty's final judgment.

New jewels, of her own selection, reposed on the velvet of her neck. It was that they were made more lovely by their association with herself, not she that was beautified by them. A new inspiration of a gossamer gown, cut modestly low and molded in perfection on her lithe and rounded figure, and apparently a new mood of brightness in her eyes and heart, combined to



create a gasp of ecstasy and envy on the lips of every woman who beheld her and to set the hearts of all the men aflame.

She and Alice were immediately besieged. It seemed as if all men in the place were determined to be first at her side. In the palmroom, in the fernery, and in the ballroom proper, vexed girls were deserted in droves. Poor little Mildred Gray, who had witnessed Willie Stetson's eager and helpless homage to the "Princess" before, was already pent with tears and indignation. There was one consolation only to bebies of sweet, pretty girl-confections, and this was that dancing must soon begin, and Thurley could at most dance with only one man at a time.

Immaculate Harry Bache-Stowe led the grand march, which began a little before ten. His partner was a last-season's beauty, Eleanor Atterbury Beekman. Thurley's lot fell to Kelsey Woods, largely in response to wishes that Alice had earlier expressed. Kelsey, indeed, had been one of their party at dinner, also by Alice's design. She was extracting almost fiendish delight in alluring Woods from the circle of one of her rivals who had queened it last season, if not with an iron, at least with a golden, rod.

Woods usurped the gladness of a King. Thistle-down could scarcely have been lighter in his arms as he and Thurley moved over the floor. "I say," said he in his candid fashion, "you've translated beauty into this sort of thing, you know. What do you think such riding and dancing must do to a fellow's heart?"

Thurley smiled in his eyes. "But I ride on a horse and dance on the floor. A heart wouldn't be at all appropriate for either."

"Nevertheless," he declared, "mine is beneath your feet."

"Oh! Isn't it hard and nicely polished?"

He tried again. "Couldn't we ride a bit together soon? I sha'n't be real happy till we do."

"I'm sorry this dance makes you so miserable," she answered. "Cheer up, it will soon be over."

"You do chaff a fellow," he murmured with a grin; "but you haven't answered about the riding. You've no idea how much it would please me."

Again she smiled. "Is it my duty to keep big boys amused?"

"I say," he demanded desperately, "will you go riding with me? Yes or no!"

Her eyes burned brighter. "Perhaps."

"Oh, Lord," he said. "Well, at least you are dancing with me now. That's something."

"But not much," she added.

"I adore it, 'pon my honor," he breathed ardently; "but I'm a silly ass!"

"You are very frank." She was enormously amused at his blunders.

He flushed to the tips of his ears. "I mean in the things I say—the way I say them—the way they sound. Confound it! May not a dunce mean what he says? I'm in a bally mix, you know. Reversion to my English schooling. I do that sort of thing with exasperating regularity; but I'm really not so stupid as I seem. Fact. And I do adore this dance with you, Miss Thurley. In fact, I—I—"

"Don't spoil the explanation, please," she interrupted. "I think I understand it fully."

Tenacity was one of his properties. He looked in

her eyes. "Shall we say to-morrow afternoon, then, for a dash in the park?"

"Not to-morrow afternoon."

"Will you set a day?"

"Will you abide by my selection?"

"Absolutely!" He was all but trembling with excitement and joy.

She was quite grave. "Well, then — say we ride on Judgment Day, about three in the afternoon — unless it rains."

He groaned. "I know what it means. You have never forgiven my bally interference. But your horse was running away."

She was instantly serious. "Oh, indeed, Mr. Woods, I thoroughly appreciated your splendid intention. It was splendid. And your horse must be superbly swift."

His pleasure returned like a homing pigeon. "Will you accept him, Miss Thurley, as a gift?"

"Oh, dear me, no!" she answered girlishly. "I couldn't possibly ride two at once, and I shouldn't think of surrendering Cataract — my 'wild Cataract that leaps in glory.' I think we could beat you in a race."

A hope was flashed on his mind. "Will you try?"

"Yes, on Judgment Day — at three."

The music ceased. The evening had begun. It became another of the triumphs that Thurley made no effort to achieve. It was a brilliant, intoxicating conclave of the goddesses of Music, Beauty, and Motion. On the breath of perfume and the wave of rhythm all manner of love crept subtly forth, the passionate with the tender, the bold with the timid, the selfish with the pure. Youths and men, the eager swains who were



granted the ecstasy of holding Thurley in their arms for a brief, bewildering rotation in the maze of the music's spell, succumbed both with and against their wills to the magic of her personality.

Stuyverant was there. He was miserable and exuberant together, consumed with impatience and despair, as he watched her dancing with and smiling upon her various partners, and vibrant with rapture when she spent a moment at his side. He was not dancing. With his right arm suspended in a sling the feat was awkward to extinction. But Thurley had granted him one of her numbers, which he meant to spend in the fernery, apart from the dazzle of the ballroom and the insistence of the music.

Meantime for Thurley the one particular variant of the evening was supplied in the various speeches and devices men choose to divulge sudden love. There was a certain eloquence in awkward feet, as well as in a stammered speech or an all revealing glance. With each and every supplicant she smiled and exchanged bright froths of nothingness. It was not altogether amusing, except as a clever fencer is amused at the thrusts and attacks of a round of antagonists, a few either clever or diabolical, but the many slow, uncertain, and unskilled.

She danced and fenced with Willie Stetson — and found him merely an overeager boy whose one idea was to take her for a drive, at any hour she liked, to any place she preferred, and in any sort of conveyance of her whim. There could be no doubt of his purblind adoration. His very knees were aching for contact with the floor anywhere about her feet.

Another of her more or less puplike idolaters was

Algy Dearborn, bitten by the malignant germ that incites its victim to the perpetration of limericks. He held her in enginelike embrace and cranked all over the floor, abandoning his trolley, so to speak, with cheerful and insistent disregard, and thereby colliding with everyone remotely adjacent.

"You're an awful jolly good dancer," he imparted delightedly. "I can really dance myself when I have such a partner as you."

Thurley assumed her gravest expression. "Perhaps I can get you one somewhere."

"What for?" he inquired in all earnestness. "Am I not dancing with you?"

"We are getting around," said Thurley, "famously."

"Do you know," he continued, as pleased as Punch, "you've inspired me like the dickens. I wrote a new poem that very first day we met."

"Why — how complimentary!"

"Wait till you hear it. Want to?"

"I am dying with impatience — or something." Her eyes looked very much alive.

He cranked about and nearly telescoped a fellow dancer's face with his shoulder blade driving for an opening in which to utter his gem.

"It's real short," he said regretfully; "but I think it rather above my average. If I can remember it right — oh, yes, it goes like this:

"A mouse with a fine sense of humour  
Said, 'Oh the ridiculous rumour  
That women have spunk!'  
And, gee! what a funk  
When he nibbled a suffragette boomer!"

Rather neat, I think, and right to the point. There's another working in me now. Do you know, Miss Thurley, I believe you are going to give my particular genius more inspiration than anyone I've ever met?"

Thurley smiled divinely. "Is there anyone who might possibly give your genius a *coup de grâce*?"

"Why, I don't know. I hope not. Why?"

"One can never tell what may happen. Some beings have such an erratic frenzy for usefulness."

"Yes, haven't they?" said Algy, a trifle hazy as to what her observations might imply. "But I think I've got such a grip on the muse that she isn't likely to get away."

Thurley's sympathy with the muse was heightened as he closed his iron levers yet more rigidly about her. He continued with his declarations of her usefulness to his inspiration and otherwise revealed his honest, if somewhat ponderous, sense of adoration. And then that dance was happily ended and Count Fiaschi succeeded to his place.

The Count had been accumulating the lavas and heats of his nature, in his accustomed Vesuvian style, for several days. He had fretted in apprehensive impatience every hour since last he had been permitted a word with Thurley alone. He was intensely excited now by the prospect of taking her all to himself into the added intoxication of the waltz.

"*Valgame Dios!*" he breathed to her rapturously. "I am more favored than the tropics! My heart is more making tumult than the seas! It is the glory of you, so long by me sought! It is my reward for devotion, burning forever like the altar lamp not to be ex-

tinguished! Ah! to quench a little of that burning thirst which my heart have blister! It is the sea of ecstasy shall enfold me!"

Thurley knew not whether to be amused or alarmed at his attitude and utterance. His eyes were certainly blazing with something that was not altogether comfortable, and beneath the handsome olive smoothness of his complexion surged a color that played like moving flame. Much of his ardor she felt inclined to ascribe to the habit of his mind. Nevertheless, she had much rather have it diffused in a company, she thought, than cope with it thus alone.

She could adopt only her ordinary tactics, a smile and a quip to meet his phrases. "Are you not afraid to mix your metaphors so recklessly?" she asked. "Might not the sea you mentioned engulf the lamp?"

"Ah! Even so! I have yet another lamp — more seas — more everything! It is my nature! With my love I will wither that sea! The rosebud shall blossom — now, now! — at the touch of this sunshine, this glory of my love! This music — ah; nothing — one pulsation of my heart! This dance with you — my soul —"

He was destined never to conclude the rhapsody. Algy Dearborn, cranking by, and repeating his mouse-bitten limerick, jolted the ribs, heart, wind, and seat of volcanics in the Count's anatomy with a contact so violent that immediate recovery was impractical. The Count ceased emptying and dancing. They walked.

Thurley's friendship went out to the gripper of the muse forthwith.

"Oh, mustn't football be splendid when the right people play?" she said with less irrelevance than

Fiaschi might have imagined. "Interference is such an unexpected art!"

"Not here!" he answered emphatically.

He took her again in the circle of his arm and resumed a somewhat less soul-levitating locomotion. For a minute or more he was content to accumulate breath and scattered senses. But he was guiding Thurley with new intent along the edge of the room, toward the more sequestered fernery, where at times a couple, detached from the assemblage of dancers, took a turn for a moment alone.

"Perhaps football would be inappropriate here," Thurley agreed innocently; "but I should be delighted to see you in a game."

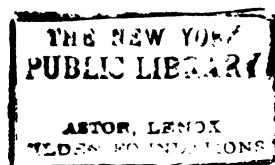
"Football — ah!" he answered, slightly shrugging his shoulders. "A game for mere animals! It lacks finesse!"

"But not finish," said Thurley. "Some people like it for that."

"But the game *par excellence* — Ah! love — love! It is here you shall better wish to see me! The white heat of my soul — the fire of divine in the blood — the beautiful madness of adoration! Ah! to know this intensity — to shame the winds — to soar upon the whirlwind — to outdistance the star with the deeps, the expanses, of love!"

"Wouldn't that be a long way out and lonely?" asked Thurley gravely. "Closer in shore is just as comfortable and there's a jolly crowd."

He looked in her eyes in his fiery fashion. "You do not understand," he said, to mask his own noncomprehension of her answer. "Ah! but you shall — divinity — the marvel of your being — this shall understand!"





*With all her strength she cast him backward.*

—Page 111

He had managed, not without skill and adroitness, to pilot her quite to the farther end of the fernery, where the dimmest glow of a golden bulb was softly diffused in the shadows. He halted here and stood, as if about to resume the dance, with his arm about her waist. His face had paled with intensified excitement. Thurley feared he might have been seriously hurt by the blow from Dearborn's elbow.

"You are injured!" she said. "You shouldn't attempt —"

"I am born again — new — the child of love!" he interrupted abruptly, his voice a mere murmur of vibrant syllables. "It is ours — the world, Eden, the path of roses, the grottos of fragrance — ours for love and yet more love — my miracle of beauty!"

He led her, drew her unexpectedly, into the dimmest recess of the ferns before she could realize his intentions, resist, or gasp an astonished protest at what he was saying.

"Adored! Divinity! Essence of my soul!" he added in the madness of his passion, and, drawing her closer, still helpless from the unexpectedness of the whole affair, he attempted to kiss her on the lips.

She was instantly struggling, incensed, and frightened. She avoided the contact, loathed by all her being; yet he kissed her once on the burning curve of her cheek before she could thrust him away.

"Count Fiaschi!" she cried. "Oh, the shame —"

"But God! My love!" he answered wildly, attempting to still her struggles. "Princess, my love! You must discover! You —"

With all her fine young strength she cast him backward. He all but fell against a monster jardinière



and broke a frond from the fern it held in recovering his balance.

Thurley started at once for the door that led to the lighted hall beyond. The music had ceased. She almost collided with a man dimly seen through blurring tears of anger. It was Robley Stuyverant.

"Miss Thurley," he said, "may I claim —"

"Oh, yes, take me out — please — anywhere!" she interrupted, struggling desperately to conceal her agitation. "The warmth — perhaps I have danced too hard."

She took his arm, her strength fairly wilting as she felt the sense of his protecting presence. She did not look where the Count had recovered both his balance and his wits. He dared step actively forward.

"But, Mademoiselle Thurley, shall it not be my privilege to return you to Madame Van Kirk?"

His very effrontery revitalized her poise and self control. "Thank you, Count Fiaschi; it will not be necessary now." She bowed, and even smiled, as Stuyverant urged her gently forward.

Then at the entrance to the larger room she received a second staggering shock to nerves already tingling. A tall, athletic figure had appeared in the lighted frame of the arch and halted to stand aside, that she and Stuyverant might pass.

It was Acton Gaillard, and his startled glance was fixed on Thurley's face as if he had seen an apparition.

For one brief second her eyes encountered his, too amazed to betray recognition. Then, demanding the utmost of her shaken strength, she continued past him coldly, while he as rigidly passed within to conclude a search for Fiaschi.

## CHAPTER XVI

### BOOTS TO TREMBLE IN

STUYVERANT felt, rather than knew, that Thurley had been uncommonly perturbed. He had only seen the Count half falling from her side, as he clutched at the fern for support. Why he had done such a thing as intrude where Fiaschi had guided the "Princess" was more than he felt he could explain.

He had merely obeyed an impulse, since neither envy nor jealousy, had they been his portion, could have forced such action upon him. The ensuing dance was his and Thurley's, to be chatted out, he had told her, making an eloquent gesture with his injured arm, by way of denoting his uselessness in a waltz.

Now, as they moved across the floor, he had a subtle comprehension of her disturbed condition. He attributed everything to Fiaschi, whom he hated thoroughly. He hoped the Count had betrayed himself so completely as to be an eliminated factor in Thurley's existence. He could not ask her what had occurred, and he could not know that the sight of Acton Gaillard, more than the abominations of Fiaschi, had wrought upon the girl at his side to humble her splendid equipoise.

Thurley, for her part, was excited to a new intensity of agitation. What it might signify thus to have Gaillard drift once more across her orbit was more than she dared conjecture. They could not help but meet. Wild dreams of denying her former identity flashed

for a moment on her thought, only to be dismissed at once as utterly preposterous. Gaillard was not the sort of man to be tricked or deceived for half a minute by any device so childish. What he would do when everyone about him in the social world was diligently advertising her as Princess Thirvinia was the inquiry haunting her reflections. Should he take the pains to declare the truth and reveal her humble origin, the disaster to herself and Alice would be appalling.

What would or could Alice do in such eventuality? Could she still continue her friendship, her support, her exploiting care and expenditures? Or would she not, in self defense, be obliged to repudiate the whole affair and charge that she herself had been defrauded?

Stuyverant was talking, trying to start a conversation, trying to lead her away to the quiet retreat of the palmroom beyond. She could not listen. She heard as one in a dream. The wondrous butterfly existence on which she was barely launched seemed about to fade away. It was only a bit of Cinderella magic, after all. And she loved it so! It had been so absolutely joyous! Its promise had been so golden and so sweet! f

In that bewildering moment she was fearfully tempted. She could meet Acton Gaillard, here, soon, within the hour, and throw herself upon his mercy, tell him all, beg him to aid her in her harmless little pretense. After all, she was not pretending much. She was merely permitting a foolish world to make her a runaway Princess. What could it possibly advantage him to reveal her as his castaway, a college widow left on the strand to continue the humblest of teaching?

He might exact some sort of price for the silence she desired. Perhaps she might meet it were it not too

high, and not even Alice be made aware of the bargain. The possibility was tremendously exciting. He had once been more than merely a friend. If by any chance he might be excited to love her anew, if her present position and all the rest might dazzle, infatuate —

Her senses whirled with chaotic possibilities and the blinding glare of temptation. How deep and cogent her temptation was she could scarcely have measured herself. It was terrible, so great was her wish to continue as she was, so abhorrent was the thought of being utterly dethroned, stripped of her finery and momentary power, and cast down headlong from this gorgeous elevation to be spurned as the merest impostor.

She clung to Stuyverant unconsciously, with the helpless weakness of a child. He thrilled as one receiving a sacred trust. He understood sufficient of her mental dilemma and oblivion to facts to realize that she was not precisely herself, that her dependence on his arm was that of one distraught. Her trust and helplessness were not to be seized and made his own, and yet they filled his being with a pulsing joy that was worth the price of a kingdom.

She was still in the whirl and daze of a Cinderella, facing the midnight's fatal stroke, when they came to an isolated bench, sequestered in the palms, and halted. This much Stuyverant had been wholly unable to resist.

"Shall we sit here where the air is fresher?" he said. "May I get you an ice or something to drink?"

"No — oh, no, thank you," she answered at last smilelessly, looking at him with her great brown eyes

as full of eager query as a child's. "Have I been acting — very queer?" She sat on the bench.

"A bit faint, I should say," he answered, taking the seat at her side. "Perhaps you were hurt, stepped upon. I never thought of that." He had suddenly remembered his own overpowering faintness when his wrist was broken in the park.

She too must have harked to that incident — and thereby roused from the daze to her mind that the sight of Gaillard had developed.

"I was a little hurt," she answered, faintly smiling in his eyes. "Isn't it odd that you should have been the one to come?"

Someway, it seemed as if pretense had fallen away, if only for the moment, and evasions and froths of conversation seemed singularly inappropriate. If she must be exposed as a mere usurper of social eminence, she wished, with sudden intensity, to be as little guilty as possible in the eyes of this one man.

The declaration in his eyes was startling in its candor. "It was a privilege, a compensation, perhaps, for all I seem doomed to surrender. If I could only feel I had been of the smallest service, it would make me immeasurably glad. But merely to force you to walk and talk is absurd as an aid to anything. Can't you let me do something more, get you something, show my willingness —"

"If you knew how good it is just to sit down — with a friend," she said, "you would not insist on serving beyond my wishes."

He smiled. "Do you think I may have forgotten the heavenly relief of sinking to a seat and — giving up the wheel to abler hands? Do you think I shall ever forget a single instant of that experience?"

It gave her joy to reflect in this hour that on that day he had seemed to care a little for a strange, impulsive girl who was guilty of no pretense, a girl whose only appeal, if she made one at all, was that of one soul to another. It was likewise sweet, in the doubts and fright of her heart, to confess to herself that she had wished from the first to be honest, sincere, and — different in every encounter and relationship with Robley Stuyverant. She knew she could not be otherwise than strictly honest with him now.

"Might it not be better," she said, with a little pang at her heart, "to forget that afternoon?"

"But why," he demanded, suddenly a prey to vague alarms, even fears of her hopeless remoteness from himself. "Why forget, when the Fates themselves arranged the meeting — invoked their powers so unexpectedly — threw me at Fortune's feet?"

"It might be better," she repeated, "if we could."

She had not intended to add those final words; but someway her heart cried out in protest, as she half perceived her fairy world retreating from her vision.

Stuyverant felt some mighty enginery lifting at his heart and a floodgate burst by pent emotions, till the warm tide engulfed his inner being. "If we could," he murmured, leaning a little nearer and barely resisting the impulse to lift her hand to his lips. "Perhaps it might be better also for the fragrance to desert the rose, for hope to withdraw from life. You have no real wish for these disasters?"

"Why, no, I — But what have these to do with — anything?"

"Might there not have been something more lovely than the scent of the rose in the help and sympathy you offered an unknown fellow being in the park?"

"It was nothing — the least that anyone could do." She was warmly glowing as she met his gaze, and the thrill in his pulses increased.

"It was such a beautiful, spontaneous action as one may not forget," he answered, his breath coming fast, his eyes aglow with ardor. "Not an accent fell, or hardly a drop of rain, that I do not remember."

She suddenly realized that she must check their wanderings; that she had permitted him to stray and draw her with him to the primrose edge, where the foothold was perilously insecure.

"How is your wrist?" she asked him earnestly. "It will not be permanently injured?"

He leaned back and met her questioning gaze with a baffling spark in his eyes. "It was not my wrist that received the serious blow."

She was suddenly crimson. It was far too alluring, far too soporific to her senses of alertness, duty, and late alarm, this honeyed fragrance of Elysian fields, where their two selves and the green and the sky were alone in all the world. It had made her forget even Gaillard, for a moment, not to mention Alice, the dance, and herself.

"Not your wrist?" she echoed, refusing to understand. "You were hurt internally? Have you seen a doctor? You shouldn't have come here to-night!"

He felt her drifting swiftly back to a more conventional mood. "Coming to-night was the only thing that could do me the least bit of good," he declared. "And it has, as you may see."

"Oh, I'm glad!" she replied. "It's the change of air and scene."

"It is what I have seen," he answered dryly, even

triumphantly, referring to the tender, honest mood she had been betrayed into revealing. "I shall always be far better, after to-night."

She half understood him only. The temptation to linger on the verge was overwhelming. "What is it you have seen?"

Again he leaned a little closer. "That the fragrance will not desert the rose."

It baffled, answered, and confused her, all at once. She felt the tides of crimson once more surging to her cheeks. Gladness, new courage, and heart happiness possessed her like essences of strength and comfort, even as some faint premonition of impending trial and climax shadowed her swiftly moving thoughts. Her candid nature urged her toward a sudden, absolute confession of it all, all that she was and all that she felt of trust and fears; but she thought of Alice, remembered her promises, and determined she must wait.

"Doesn't the music, and everything, make everyone poetic?" she answered smilingly. "Oh, that reminds me! Will you take me to Alice, now?"

"Certainly," he answered, without moving; "but they are still dancing. It is still my number. Do you very much wish to go?"

She laughed. "Do you much wish me to stay?"

"Just a little more than anything else in the world."

A little of her roguishness returned. She rose from the bench. "Then by all means remain, and I will go alone, and both our wishes will be granted."

He could not have repressed his smile, despite his disappointment. "If witches had not been abolished by law," he said, "some of us would tremble in our boots."



She was facing her Cinderella hour in the moment she started for the larger room, where Gaillard would doubtless be encountered.

"Think of the luck of having boots to tremble in," she answered, "or even a pair of slippers."

He took her back to Alice, as the music died away and the chatter of voices arose. She had barely been seated at her fairy godmother's side when Gaillard appeared with a common friend, to be formally presented.

## CHAPTER XVII

### LOST GROUND TO BE REGAINED

THE dance was an extra, interpolated in a program already sufficiently protracted. Gaillard had assumed it as a natural right with a boldness and directness that left Thurley practically helpless.

The somewhat dazed and wondering condition of her mind had returned; but a certain strength and resolution had been fortified in her being by her heartening little chat with Stuyverant. She found herself hanging on Gaillard's arm and walking at his side before she could possibly have formulated a plan either of attack or of defense.

He had lost not a whit of his self assurance or his arrogance of spirit. He was tanned, but otherwise bore that same marked air of perfected immaculateness. He was faultlessly dressed, and presented, as ever, that distinguished manner of superiority that, with his handsome face, had once made ready prey of Thurley's heart.

"Well, Thurley," he said in his evenly modulated murmur, adjusted so readily to carry to her ears alone, "we meet again."

She could only nod her head. Already the wisdom of abandoning all thought of deception was apparent to her mind.

"How marvelously well you look," he continued.

"You fit your niche, and fill your rôle to perfection. You don't know how glad I am to see you again — and to see you here."

She felt the significance of those final words as if they had been written in fire. Seeing her here was so different from seeing her a tutor in New Haven! Her heart was beating in a wild little flutter, half of fear, half of anger, to think he must thus return to cross her path. She attempted a smile. "You are very kind."

He pressed her arm tightly with his own. "Do you know, little girl, after all, there is nobody like you in the world?"

Thurley resented his attitude. She instantly foresaw by intuition that Gaillard would presume upon their past relationship, and her old resolve to mete him out his punishment flashed to rebirth in her breast. She realized, however, the utter futility of her threat, in the present situation. She was helplessly delivered to his power — unless she should choose to abandon all her golden world for the luxury of one great outburst of scorn. She was hedged about with dangers; she knew she must move discreetly and with skill.

She required time to think and feel her way. Her best defense was persiflage and unobtrusive fencing. "Nobody like me at all?" she asked him lightly. "Is that rather fortunate — or otherwise?"

"Look here!" he said. "You may as well know, Thurley, that I never got over my genuine feeling, after all. I hurt myself worse than I ever injured you."

The truth of the matter was that her beauty had overwhelmed him, made captive his self-centered being, while the things he had heard of the "Princess" and

the obvious madness of her suitors, paying court, had aroused his pique, his jealousy, his overwhelming love of dominance, and set him mad to possess his oldtime mastery again.

All this was apparent to Thurley, through senses overacute in this crisis of affairs. She was rapidly losing her sense of alarm and gaining courage and repose. His power might be great; but his weakness gave her hope. She was stubbornly determined, moreover, that he should not triumph absolutely, no matter what course he pursued.

"Injured me?" she said. "I'm sorry if I look injured — or anything like that."

"You don't," he admitted, aware he had blundered and determined to strike another course. "You never looked more absolutely glorious in your life. Tell me, Thurley, how did it happen? What does it mean, this delightful and amazing little masquerade, this Princess claim of yours and Alice Van Kirk's?"

It had come a little sooner than she expected. Yet, after all, it was Gaillard's brute way to reveal his claws at once. She arched her brows in query and surprise. "Have you heard that either Mrs. Van Kirk or I have advanced any claims, to anything at all?"

"Why — everybody's talking of it, everybody's convinced it's true. That's the joke, of course. I don't say who started the claim; but you and Alice Van Kirk are perfectly aware of what is going on."

"And you find it something to resent?" She asked it with a smile that stung and captivated, accused and inflamed him, together.

"Not at all! I, Thurley? Do you know me so little as that? I was enormously amused and pleased.

It's something to be the only one who knows the truth. I want you to keep it up."

The character of her smile slightly altered at this added disclosure of his power. "It is like you to wish me to keep it up," she answered inscrutably. "I could be very happy gratifying such a friend."

How much of her speech carried the acid of satire he could not immediately determine. He only knew he held a species of scepter, and that new infatuation with this radiant girl was flaming his blood with desire again to usurp the place of a monarch at her side.

"Are you just a little angry with me, Thurley?" he inquired. "You would punish me now for the fault committed in a moment of folly?"

She looked more astonished than before. "Do I appear so like some horrid little tyrant?" she asked. "What have I done by way of punishment — punishing anyone?"

The music arose. He took her in the curve of his arm and they began to dance. "Come now, little girl," he murmured caressfully, "let's be candid and make no pretenses with each other. We were more than friends, last winter and spring. My roses and chocolates were more than welcome, and the drives we took, and the rest. I confess my error in passing it up, and so I say let's go back to it all and forget the little lapse of time."

What a hot little flame of resentment burned up in her nature at his words, his assumption, his demeanor! They had been more than friends, indeed! How readily he remembered now the things once so easy to forget! She could still recall his words of dismissal, at least in effect; "This sort of thing can't go on forever. . . .

You knew all along I'd some day leave and follow my career. Now let's forget it. . . . You've always been a thoroughbred, and I thought of course you'd be one to the end."

A score of answers rose to her lips, stinging, angry speeches that his conduct had deserved. She dispelled them with a smile. She had no intention of revealing oldtime scars, or permitting the loss of her own invaluable self control. If war she must, the method must be subtle.

"The little lapse of time!" she repeated, with a barely audible laugh. "Isn't so very long, is it? And yet so many things have changed."

"But not for you and me, little sweetheart," he said, in the deepest caress of his voice. "Can't you close your eyes and see it all, just as it was in our wonderful days last spring?"

She could have struck him for daring to employ such a term of endearment. She loathed that quality within him that made it possible for the man to take advantage of the situation thus shamelessly. Yet the glance she cast him was artfully modified.

"My eyes are so persistently wide open," she said. "And even if I closed them the present would impinge upon my vision."

A flush of something other than pleasure passed across his face, while a flash shot through his eyes. "Do you mean you refuse to think kindly of the past?"

She felt the underlying challenge in his tone. "Oh, the past is very dear to me, indeed. I think of it kindly very often — parts of the past, at least."

"But of me, Thurley? Are you going to forgive

me, let me come to see you soon, let me try to make amends for my folly, and all that sort of thing?"

"Everybody calls at Mrs. Van Kirk's," she told him evasively. "I don't see why you shouldn't."

"You know what I mean," he insisted, half resentfully. "Isn't it something that I confess the mistakes and foolishness I committed at commencement?"

She assumed her grave little way. "Why, yes, it's very interesting to learn you made mistakes."

He was baffled for a moment and felt his impatience increase. "You are dodging the issue, little girl," he said, attempting a lighter demeanor. "I can understand you are flattered by a dozen or so of these Johnnies dancing attendance on a pretty girl they have heard and believe is a runaway Princess; but you and I know each other well enough to be able to laugh at them all and enjoy a little private joke of our own. I am going to call and see you. There were sacred things between you and me that demand consideration."

Much of his oldtime demeanor of ownership, once completely fascinating, made vibrant the murmur of his voice. Much of the former light of his triumphant strength was in his eyes. He held her closer, as if to make her feel her helplessness — and she understood his attitude of mind, which was not devoid of threat.

She did not then and there determine on a method for his subsequent humiliation; for alarms and uncertainties and desire for counsel with Alice were too much on her mind. She only knew that her plan for keeping Alice uninformed would be a grave mistake, and indeed her one desire was to get her away to their private home and unburden her mind of it all. She conjured a smile as before.

"You will have to make your treaty first with Mrs. Van Kirk," she told him noncommittally. "She is naturally in command."

"I will," he said.

The music stopped.

The men regathered about her. He presently surrendered her arm and bowed himself away.



## CHAPTER XVIII

### DELAYED DECISIONS

THE remainder of the evening was, for Thurley, more of a trial than a comfort. Her triumph continued; but she felt its hollowness, felt that mockery dogged her footsteps and that dark abysses loomed ahead.

She could not escape her besiegers, the eager swains who continued, in varying manner, to convey their state of heart and mind. Count Fiaschi was not in the least rebuffed; at least to outward appearances. Both he and Gaillard took advantage of every possible moment to push to her side and renew their more or less invulnerable wooing.

Even the midnight supper, where at thirty daintily decorated little tables the guests were assembled for refreshment, failed to reinspire the ingenuous delight with which the "Princess" had entered upon the evening.

It was late, and Thurley was weary and a little depressed, when at length she and Alice retreated from the scene to be driven to their home. Both would undoubtedly have been thoroughly alarmed had they known that in the street outside a man had waited all the evening, spying upon their movements.

It was the same individual who, on the night of the Horse Show, had exchanged a glance with the ashy eyed woman before he followed them through the avenue in a hired taxicab. He tagged them to-night like

a shadow, and in front of Alice's mansion was relieved by another of his ilk who would help to keep an unbroken record of every movement Thurley made and the visitors who came to the place.

There was no immediate retiring when Alice and her protégée were finally alone. To Fiaschi had been granted the privilege of riding with them to the door. Thurley had managed to avoid actual contact with the nobleman; but something in her conduct and silence while in the carriage had addressed itself to Alice Van Kirk's intuitions and aroused her curiosity. She followed Thurley to the girl's boudoir for a confidential chat.

"Well, Deary," she said in genuine affection, as she seated herself at ease, after having temporarily dismissed the maids, "another joy and trial over. You made me very proud and happy. You enjoyed it, I hope? It was easily all your evening."

Thurley was pulling off her gloves. She sank in a chair and looked at Alice just a little wistfully, her dark brows slightly raised in youthful query. "Must I say I did to please you? For I would—I'd say anything to give you pleasure," she replied. "I did enjoy it at first, more than any experience in my life, and then —"

She did not finish, and Alice waited, her intuitions receiving prompt confirmation. "And then, Deary—what?" she inquired softly. "You know I felt that something had marred it just a little."

"Two things," said Thurley candidly. "I've been dying for the last two or three hours to get you away and tell you all about it."

Alice settled farther in the chair. The color

mounted to Thurley's cheeks as she found herself thus committed, and the task of confessing harder to face than she had previously expected.

"Something disagreeable?" Alice encouraged. "You needn't mind telling me, you know. We're good friends, no matter what may happen." Sudden alarm possessed her. "It isn't that some hot headed man has already proposed and you've —"

"Oh, Lordy, no!" Thurley interrupted, instantly placed at her ease. "It wasn't so decent as that, on the part of the Count, though I don't pretend to know his final intentions."

Alice sat up more rigidly. "Oh! The Count has —"

Thurley suddenly rose and dashed a tear of anger from her eyes. "He kissed me — he dared to do that — out in the fernery! I could have killed him!"

Her indignation required no protestation. It was advertised in all her attitude as she turned from her protector to hide the crimson of her face.

Alice could make no immediate reply. She was angered, exasperated, and thoroughly undecided as to what she ought to do.

"It was bad enough," Thurley continued, "to have him talk nothing but his nonsense! And to dare to face me afterward — and even come home with us too! The horrid beast!"

"In the fernery?" said Alice. "What did you do?"

"I hardly know," said Thurley, and related her somewhat confused remembrance of the incidents as they happened. "I must have struck him, or something; for he nearly fell. Then I begged Robley

Stuyverant to take me away." She halted there, with a new flush of color creeping to her cheeks, at the memory of seeing Gaillard in the door.

Alice tapped the floor with a small, impatient slipper. "This is really too bad," she answered presently. "I need the Count so badly, just at this time. Mind you, Deary, I shouldn't care how severely you punish him, or humiliate him later, if only we could manage to keep him on for a time, in spite of what he has done."

Thurley stared at her in honest amazement. "You wish me to see him, endure him, after this?"

"I know exactly how you feel, my dear, and I admire you for it," Alice answered; "but our position is peculiar. It may last a brief time only, this triumph. For many reasons I did very much desire to treat the Count rather well, as well as the others, at least, and now I'm annoyed more than I can tell. The miserable — I knew it — I felt he was quite that sort. Thurley, isn't it finer art, more gratification in the end, to let him return for his meed of deliberate retribution? Couldn't you skewer him far more satisfactorily by calm intent than by mere impulsive resentment?"

"Oh, I've thought of that," Thurley confessed in her usual candor, resuming her seat a little wearily. "I've thought of so many things to-night. You see, he isn't all."

In her agitation Alice had momentarily forgotten Thurley's statement that two events had marred the pleasure of the evening. "Oh," she said. "Yes, there's something more. Not so bad as this, I trust?"

Thurley was once again all courage and honesty.

"I'm not so sure. It may be worse. You remember

meeting Mr. Gaillard?" Alice nodded, and she continued. "He knew me in New Haven. He was even my — At least I thought he intended — He threw me over, in plain English, and now — now he wants to make love to me again."

Alice stared, all but speechless. "Thurley! And you — like him still?"

Thurley rose again, superbly active. "I hate him! To think he'd come like this — now — and dare! Oh, it does seem as if I've got a right to make him suffer!"

Alice rose too. "This is certainly grave. He mentioned your present position, asked questions, I presume? He isn't positively the cad to take advantage of his knowledge!"

"I don't know," said Thurley, once more relapsing into her chair. "He hinted at things, and of course asked questions and made insinuations. He insisted on coming to see me, going back to our old relationship, and said he'd make his treaty with you."

"And you?" said Alice. "You were careful, of course, noncommittal? You didn't leave him offended or vengeful?"

Thurley's eyes flashed warringly. "No! I almost determined to do everything in my power to lead him on, and then later even up the score; but he made me so angry I don't know whether I could really do it or not. I'd probably despise myself. I'd rather not try. I don't know what to do."

Alice smiled in sheer relief. She was suddenly sure of the future.

"Don't try to decide anything to-night, my dear, and don't be uneasy, or angered, or anything but amused — at least for the present. It's time we re-

tired. Don't forget, dear Princess, that you are certain to be the target for all of Cupid's arrows, the bitter with the sweet. It is sometimes possible to fight fire only with fire, and some kinds of love with — art." She kissed the tired girl affectionately and smiled reassuringly.

"But," said Thurley, "when he comes to see you — what will you do?"

"Nothing you will refuse to ratify; nothing the situation does not justify, either with him or Fiaschi. But I hope, dear child, we're the equal of two selfish men. Will you leave it all to me?"

"My fairy godmother!" said Thurley smilingly. "What else could I possibly do?"

## CHAPTER XIX

### THREATS AND CARRIAGES

GAILLARD called the following afternoon, and met such a radiant welcome on the part of Alice Van Kirk as not even his largest assurance would have ventured to predict. Thurley he did not see. At Alice's counsel the "Princess" had accepted an invitation to drive with Willie Stetson and his mother in the park. Willie was expected almost momentarily.

Gaillard looked well. He was well and confident and determined, having happened upon added information since the ball concerning the favor and feverish regard in which "Princess" Thurley was held, especially by eager male admirers.

Quite as well satisfied to interview Alice alone, as a sort of preliminary maneuver in his game, the visitor readily followed to her lavender nookery and agreed to drink a cup of tea. "I told you last night I hoped to call," he said. "You see, I have not delayed in proving my friendly intentions."

"I'm so glad!" said Alice graciously. "I can scarcely understand how it happened we never met before." She knew his antecedents, and the wealth and pedigree they had boasted for three generations.

"I have been in New York but little," he confessed, especially during the last few years. "Of course I have heard your name a great many times recently, coupled with that of your beautiful protégée."

Alice mentally acknowledged the promptness with which he swung about to the subject uppermost in his thoughts. "One hears so many things in these days of wireless!" she laughed. "It ought to be called the Wireless Age — or perhaps the Regardless Age would be more accurate."

Gaillard nodded in a quick, curt way which Thurley would have recognized as a sign of impatience to achieve some object sought with the greatest possible expedition. "I was very agreeably surprised," he stated, "to encounter Thurley again last night at the dance."

Alice, hardly less than Thurley herself, resented his tone and familiarity. She arched her brows. "Thurley?"

"Miss Ruxton," he corrected, slightly flushing. "She may not have told you we are — well, old acquaintances."

Alice had decided to reveal as little as circumstances might permit. "She was very tired last night when we returned."

Gaillard narrowed his eyes. The matter in hand was one of business with him, and he meant to be sufficiently plain. "I knew her very well — more than ordinarily well — in New Haven."

"Oh." Alice betrayed not the slightest emotion, and not a very pronounced interest.

"You can imagine my surprise and delight, my amusement, I might say," he resumed, "to learn the extraordinary misidentification of Thurley that all New York seems so agreed upon. Rich, isn't it?"

"You mean the outcome of her remarkable resemblance to —"



"This Princess Thirvinia business, certainly," he supplied. "It's a wonderful joke, a stupendous joke, that the swell set is playing on itself. Not that Thurley doesn't look the part, and all that sort of thing. She's a wonderful little girl; no one knows it better than I. But what would happen, I wonder, if the truth should happen to leak?" He laughed, and she thought his mirth distinctly disagreeable.

"You are aware, I hope," she answered, "that neither Miss Ruxton nor myself has ever contributed anything to what you term this stupendous joke?"

"That's the beauty of it, the art," he stated baldly. "I recognized that at once. But wouldn't it jar all upper-crustdom to wake up some morning to the facts?" He laughed again, adding, "Not that it's likely they will."

His dwelling upon this possibility jarred upon Alice sufficiently to rouse all her sense of distrust and dislike. It sounded too much in the nature of a menace, a father to his thought, if not a pronouncement of his power. She wished to sound him thoroughly.

"Would it necessarily disturb our friends to lose one Princess and discover another? They might even rejoice to find she was not of the foreign nobility."

"Oh, that part of it, of course," he admitted bluntly; "but they might discover she was once just a pretty girl in New Haven tutoring, and living a very humble life. Not that anything of the sort would make the slightest difference to anyone like myself," he hastened to add; "but to others would the joke be quite as palatable? Of course they may never find it out."

Mentally Alice branded him a cad whom not even youth could excuse. Outwardly she was still all smiles and entertainment, "Of what possible advan-

tage could it be, I wonder," she said, "for anyone who chanced to know all this to advertise the facts?"

"Oh, none whatever!" he assured her with alacrity. "It's just odd that I should be the only one to know. It heightens my interest in the game, doesn't it? I feel toward Thurley as none of these Johnnies could."

"And she feels the same toward you?" He had the grace to flush a trifle in momentary confusion.

"She did — she — may I not be permitted a little modesty?"

"As much as you like," she answered heartily, glad to know he had at least a speaking acquaintance with the word. "Pardon my question. It was probably unfair, but prompted by my interest in — you both."

"We shall be good friends," he answered confidently. "I naturally expect to see rather a lot of the little girl."

A clatter of hoofs, as of a cavalcade, intruded itself through the window, followed almost at once by silence.

Then a footman appeared at the open door and engaged the attention of his mistress. She crossed to him at once.

"Mr. Stetson, Madam, if you please," announced the servant quietly. "Shall I speak to Miss Thurley, Madam?"

"At once, James." She smiled back at Gaillard. "You will excuse me just a moment?" and she hastened to the reception room, where Stetson was waiting, as blushing and self conscious as a girl.

"Oh, here you are, Alice!" he said, attempting to laugh away his nervousness. "You see, I didn't know, of course, what carriage Miss Thurley might prefer; so I brought them all."

"Brought them all!" echoed Alice, moving at once

to the window and sweeping aside the filmy trceries of lace. "In Heaven's name, Willie Stetson, did you come to take a whole asylum for a drive?"

It appeared very much as if he had. There was a very cavalcade of vehicles out by the curb, each with a man in attendance. Every known and unknown contrivance on wheels was represented, — carts, drags, hacks, cabs, landaus, victorias, phaetons, an automobile, everything save a baby perambulator and a wheelbarrow.

"Well, she might as well have her choice, mightn't she?" inquired the embarrassed Willie. "Mother, you see, has no preference, really. She'd ride in anything I suggested. Deuced clever little mother!"

Mother was seated in the foremost rig at the moment. She was a harmless, mindless little person, immovably persuaded that the universe pivoted somewhere in Willie's system.

"I see," said Alice. "Your plan is at least unique."

Thurley having seen the arrival of Willie's procession, was already coming down when James was half-way to the floor above.

"What is it?" she said, as she entered the room. "Oh, Mr. Stetson, how do you do?"

"Nicely, thank you," said Willie, once more blushing profusely. "Awfully jolly to see you again. I was just telling Alice I brought everything around to give you something of a choice. She says my plan is unique. I was hoping it might seem different, not too beastly commonplace."

Thurley came to the window and cast a glance up and down the imposing line. "I don't believe I quite

understand," she confessed. "We couldn't ride in them all."

"Why not?" asked Willie. "If we like — you like, I mean. I thought we'd start in the one you prefer and the others could follow behind, in case you'd like to change, you know, or anything like that."

"Oh, my! Please send them away, all but the one your mother's in," said Thurley. "That is your mother, I suppose?"

"That's the mater, all right; but — send them away? Are you sure that's the one you prefer. If you'd like any other horses put to the carriage —"

"Willie, go take your drive, like a rational being!" Alice interrupted. "I never heard of anything like it in my life!"

"All right," said Willie cheerfully. "Really it doesn't make the slightest bit of difference to mother or me."

He went out, and, like the dismemberment of a circus, the vehicles started away round the corner and down the avenue with the most diverting variety of paces. Then Willie, mother, and Thurley disappeared, the "Princess" gayly but discreetly waving to Alice, still standing by the window.

"Dear girl!" she murmured to herself, and returned to the nookery and Gaillard.

He had risen, upon her retreat from the room, and beheld, from the window, the departure of Thurley with her friends. Piqued by a realization that others besides himself were in daily attendance here at the "royal palace," he was thoroughly determined to pursue his advantage to the uttermost, regardless of Alice Van Kirk.

"Where were we?" Alice asked him, as she gave him one of her bright, disarming smiles. "Had we just about exhausted our subject?"

He could think of nothing new to say, as a matter of fact, that would not be either mere repetition or something too much in the nature of a threat to be judicious. "Our subject was Thurley," he answered, attempting a smile of his own. "Such a subject could scarcely be exhausted in an afternoon."

"Ah, yes — and your past relationship, or something of the sort. Was that not finished either?"

Gaillard was not entirely persuaded as to the full significance of her question. He concluded to be on the safer side. He drew back the corners of his mouth peculiarly. It was not a very pleasant expression.

"The relation has never been finished," he answered incisively. "It has really just begun."

It was a bold speech, almost defiantly delivered. Alice accepted its challenge mentally with a certain zest that heightened her color.

"Oh. Well, of course that, after all, is a matter for you and Thurley alone," she answered. "It was not your intention to enlist my services in your behalf, naturally?"

It was rather a blunt question, one calculated to uncover his batteries, so to speak. He recognized its nature. "Why, no, not precisely; but, standing as you do, somewhat as Thurley's sponsor, promoter, friend, you can see that the least I could do was to make the matter plain to you as soon as possible, let you know *everything* about it."

The joker lay in his emphasis on the one word "everything," as Alice readily divined. What he meant to convey was simply that he wished her to know without

delay that his power was great and he meant to employ it to any required extent; that he would not be blocked by herself, her plans, or even by Thurley herself.

"I am very glad you came for this revealing chat," she told him, smiling as she rose from her chair. "It clears things wonderfully always to be perfectly frank."

He too rose, aware the interview was ended. Her baffling inscrutability, which he felt and a little comprehended, annoyed him excessively. Her apparent candor and acquiescence veiled so much, and left him so little with which to contend or struggle. He had come prepared for open war, if need be; he found his heavy artillery useless. But one thing more he did intend,— that Alice should know he meant to see Thurley often, take her out publicly, and exhibit to the world his particular favor in her sight.

"Now that I am back, with considerable leisure," he said, "I shall arrange quite a program for the little girl. I have seen her so little for the last few months that there's a good deal of time to make up. I may come around—in fact, I shall come around—to-morrow with my car; unless, of course, you and Thurley have some particular engagement."

His assumption of mastership in the situation all but took Alice's breath. It was almost admirable. It aroused her ire and amusement together. She thought she foresaw the means of his own undoing by its own very weight and persistence.

"Why, yes, by all means come to-morrow," she said. "It will be a great pleasure for us all."

He thanked her, shook her proffered hand, and was presently gone, still wondering just what her manner signified and how far she would aid or oppose him.

## CHAPTER XX

### AN IMPERIAL VISITOR

THE following noon Gaillard received a note that Alice had hastily scrawled:

Yesterday I quite forgot that this was my afternoon at home. Forgive me and come. We shall expect you; do not disappoint us.

This was signed "Cordially yours." There was nothing to do but go. Gaillard went — and found himself obliged to share the "Princess" with more than the usual number of men, among whom was the Count.

Acton was not at all pleased to find Fiaschi present and obviously pursuing his one "great game" in his periodically eruptive manner. Gaillard and the Count were Continental acquaintances. They were, in a manner, friends. Their relationship was more in some ways and less in others than one of mere friendliness, since in a deal concerned with foreign securities they were intimately bound together.

The matter involved tremendous sums of money. It was planned to involve much more, which should presently materialize as "velvet," in which they would share alike. It was all necessarily a secret enterprise, the negotiations for which were being conducted daily as the various phases of a huge flotation developed. Up to the present moment these two men, varying widely in many attributes, had met with complete accord, so far as matters of a purely business nature were con-

cerned. Beyond that point, and more chiefly concerning affairs of a sentimental nature, they were quite at variance, neither one admiring or desiring to adopt the methods of the other.

To find Fiaschi here, and obviously not a new recruit at Thurley's court, but even somewhat in apparent favor, at least with Alice Van Kirk, was distinctly distasteful to the college man who had once made college widows. He meant to brook no interference by such a being as the Count, no matter what expedients might be found necessary for his elimination from the drama.

The Count, for his part, frankly despised Gaillard's methods with women, and, secretly sneering also at some of his business tactics, concerned himself but little with a rival whom he felt to be essentially weak in fervor, poetry, and the glamor of the game.

On the other side of the complex situation were ranged two dimpled women, with never an armament bristling in view. They had come to understanding and agreement with the utmost ease. Thurley, from having half decided that Fiaschi and Gaillard should both be punished through their own devices, had readily succumbed to Alice's added resentment, and consented to her plan. It was simply to permit these men to feel as much encouraged as they pleased — and let them await the hour for their own reward to overtake them. To fight with either would be folly of the most destructive sort, and inartistic. Alice was thoroughly esthetic in her adherence and devotion to art. As a feminine technician, moreover, she was unexcelled.

The battle of unseen forces began that afternoon. Not only did Alice and Thurley assume new tactical positions, but Gaillard and Fiaschi cleared their decks



for action, one against the other; while Stuyverant, Stetson, Algy Dearborn, Kelsey Woods, Beau Brymmer, Captain Fowler, and nearly a dozen lesser luminaries took careful account of the enemies' strength and position, and planned for or groped toward some more or less definite campaign.

At the present moment the tuneful Algy was quite at the fore of the firing line and was gleefully discharging the weapons he felt convinced were most certain to achieve victory over all who might engage.

"You know it's wonderful, really," he announced to Thurley, "the effect you have on my creative ability — stirring up the muse! You're oats and barley and all that sort of thing, you know, to my Pegasus. Real jolly of you, too. I told you a new one was working up — another of my poems. I fancy it's a bit original. Shall I give it to you?"

"I should be sorry to miss anything in creation," Thurley answered, genuinely amused by Algy's manifestation of genius. "Is it very long?"

"That's the deuce of it!" Algy confessed. "I can't seem to keep up the white heat — the pressure, you know — for very long at a time. All my poems are short, so far, though some have a sort of epic swing, I rather fancy. This one goes — if I can remember it straight — Oh, er — yes. It starts off 'I say.' It's really all in quotation marks. You might keep that in mind. It goes like this:

" 'I say,' said the hare to the tortoise,  
    'How comes it that persons import us  
        To run in a race  
        If they mean to efface  
And in soup and in ragouts to thwart us?'

The humorous vein, you see. Neat, isn't it? And contains such a lot! I like that line, 'And in soup and in ragouts,' and so forth. And after all, there's philosophy in it. I'm glad it amuses you, really."

It did, almost as much as he did himself. Thurley enjoyed both limerick and Algy thoroughly. They were such a relief from some of the men and affairs too insistently serious; "I hope your genius will flourish," she told him honestly. "Thank you so much for letting me be oats and barley to Pegasus—dear old Pegasus, the many-gaited! What endurance some creatures have!"

"Really I never ride him overtime," said Algy gravely. "You know 'a merciful man' and the rest of it. Better keep him fresh, I say, if one doesn't wish to become a cropper."

Alice broke his spell relentlessly, as one who knows the necessity of rotating the crops, as it were. Thurley was presently listening to and even smiling at the utterances of Count Fiaschi, as if nothing in the world had ever happened. Later it was Gaillard, in a somewhat sullen, wholly selfish, and exacting mood, that she calmed and soothed with softened word and smile.

With something inherently skillful, as well as naïve, she contrived to impress upon each and everyone of her envious and watchful suitors the conviction that he, above all others, had been favored, inducted into a little private corner of her real regard, and pedestaled all by himself.

Indeed, that afternoon became typical of the days and maneuvers to follow. The game developed all manner of mild excitements and vast necessity for skill, adroitness, and tact. To adjust her hours, moods, and

movements to the needs of the game, avoiding collisions of the pieces on the board, and keeping them all in active play, yet never overplayed, to the essential neglect of others, demanded all the judgment, good nature, and finesse of which both Thurley and Alice were capable.

A chase could have been no more exciting. Merely to allay the suspicions constantly preying upon both Gaillard and Fiaschi required breathless fencing, quite absorbing in itself. But the more they exacted, the more grew the zest with which Thurley entered the conflict. The engagements increased in intensity day by day, as the men's impatience and new demands were multiplied; yet, even while they arrogated powers and assurance to themselves, more strong grew Thurley's resentment of their attitude and greater was her desire to see them leveled.

During all this season of uncertainty, evasions, and "back firing on dangerous love," as Alice termed the game, there were two persistent elements that gnawed just a bit at Thurley's heart. One was a certain increasing anxiety and dubiety attacking Robley Stuyverant, as he watched her movements and seemingly heartless democracy with all these admiring men; the other was a series of pangs and anger excited in the breast of little Mildred Gray.

There was nothing emphatic to be done at such a juncture to allay the emotions of either. Robley, grown singularly isolated from the others, not only by his behavior and sincerity, but as well by her own increasing regard and desire for his honest comradeship, Thurley could not approach with tenderness because of her promises to Alice and the delicate situation hedging them both about. She beheld his suspicions and his ardors alternate, and was helpless. She felt her-

self drawn to him day after day, yet could treat him no more warmly than the men she had grown to fear and despise.

It hurt her to feel that she must, perforce, be constantly misunderstood. There was never a moment when she did not wish his confidence, his trust — and perhaps something more, for which she began at last to ache, before she even understood the yearning of her soul. As one across a yawning chasm, she sent him thoughts he could not read and she herself had not interpreted to the full extent of their meaning. She knew she thrilled when he came to her side; she knew she lived over their first afternoon together repeatedly, always in a golden haze that lifted them both above the earth; but she did not realize even then how mighty was the bond of love between them.

Concerning Mildred her regrets were neither so poignant nor incurable. She had early resolved to put this worried little being's fears at rest at the earliest possible moment — so far as she was able. Nevertheless, she was sensitive to anyone's dislike, and more than the men's she courted her own sex's favor.

This was the state of affairs at Alice's "palace" for nearly a week, and then, as if the complications were not already sufficient, an astonishing new element was added to the little drama that centered on Thurley's head.

It came in the person of two extraordinary German individuals, on a Friday evening, just at the dinner's conclusion. Only one sent in his card, which was duly presented to Alice. On it was printed:

Herr Otto Wenck.

Beneath this was written:

Desiring to see Mrs. Van Kirk and young lady styled Miss Thurley

O. W., for Hertzegotha.

Alice read it to herself in bewilderment, then read it aloud to Thurley. "I don't understand it in the least," she said. "What could it possibly mean?"

"Hertzegotha," repeated Thurley, suddenly a trifle pale. "Alice! It's someone from her country looking for Princess Thirvinia! What shall we do?"

Alice had risen galvanically. "Good heavens! Well, I suppose it had to come," and she shrugged her shoulders. "We may as well see Herr Wenck."

## CHAPTER XXI

### WENCK, FOR HERTZEGOTHA

THURLEY heard him as one in a dream, as he bent very low above her hand and touched it with his lips. He spoke in German.

"Permit me, your Highness, to present my humble self, the special agent of your Highness' Imperial Government at Hertzegotha."

It seemed incredible, this fiery haired, fiery whiskered being representing the land of the runaway Princess, accepting herself for that erratic young personage with a confidence and demeanor that left no doubt of his absolute conviction that the Princess stood before him. She thought of one faltering test.

"But, Mein Herr," she answered in his native tongue, "I regret to say I have never seen you before."

"Ah, that is my misfortune," he told her readily. "Never have I been at your court but once, when by great favor of the Fates I beheld your Highness from afar."

This, then, was the explanation. The resemblance she doubtless bore to the Princess, known to be somewhere concealed in America, was sufficient to convince him of her royal identity. She knew not what to do or what to answer. She took half a moment in which to glance at her visitor's companion.

He was one of those intensely black Teutons, with a military brush of bristles on top of his head and an

equally bristling shoe dauber prickling at his nose. His expression was most severe. As a matter of fact, he was thoroughly mild, and at the present moment too thoroughly awed to breathe in his normal manner.

It seemed to Thurley that the joke was proceeding just a trifle too far; that to go on permitting these serious representatives of a serious, worried Government to continue in their error was not precisely justifiable. She wished, more than anything in the world, for fifteen minutes alone with Alice. She was mentally staggering like a dizzy dervish, to grasp at something to say, when Alice came adroitly to the rescue.

"Herr Wenck," she said "my German is sadly at fault; but I beg to suggest that this young lady, making no claims to the honors you have named, at least while sojourning here with me, would be infinitely more pleased to have you address her as Miss Thurley and to treat her only with the courtesy attaching to the station of an American gentlewoman."

Thurley could have hugged her with gratitude. It placed them both on a footing of making no pretense, made her Americanism a factor to be expected, and gave her a cue as well. They had still, however, to reckon with Herr Wenck, charged with important business.

"It is frequently painful," said he, bowing profoundly, "to have a duty that one must discharge. It shall be my obligation, since your Highness desires it, to address you henceforth as Miss Thurley; but to deliver my message I came, and I crave your Imperial — your American — pardon if I feel that to persist is necessary."

Thurley sat down, largely for need of support. Alice

followed her example. The men remained standing, as rigidly as soldiers.

"You have a message?" Thurley inquired, and she felt how weak was the question. "I should be sorry indeed to interfere in the discharge of your duties."

It was a skillful speech, claiming nothing, consenting to as much as the agent of Hertzegotha chose to believe.

Beneath her breath Alice said, "Bravo, little girl! You're a wonder!"

Herr Wenck appeared enormously relieved. "Your graciousness is overwhelming," he told her gravely, having feared for the failure of his mission. "I bear the message that the imperial Government of Hertzegotha is exceedingly distressed at the unexampled disappearance and absence of her Imperial Highness the Princess Thirvinia from the Kingdom, and to beg her, in all humility, to return at the earliest possible moment."

Thurley could have smiled, had the situation not presented the gravest of phases, from the viewpoint of this special agent from a Germanic principality. She could see no open course but that of continuing a species of candor that, if it slightly but harmlessly misled these visitors, would at least not jeopardize Alice and make her ridiculous.

"I fear I may not promise at this time to leave New York or America," she said. "I trust my declaration will in no way compass your discredit with your superiors."

"But," said the eager Wenck, overimportunate in his worry, "if you could but realize the calamity — its proportions — the uneasiness — the fears! Think



of the many disasters that may result, should your absence be longer continued! Already your fiancé, the Grand Duke of Saxe Hertz and Heimer, has likewise disappeared — perhaps to cross the ocean that he may find you and induce your return!”

“I knew he had disappeared — I knew — I read —” said Thurley, checking a speech she felt might contribute too much to the agent’s uneasiness. “But I do not expect to see him, I assure you — I mean, I am exceedingly sorry you have been occasioned so much anxiety, and I wish I might relieve it; but I cannot think of going to Hertzegotha.”

“But — not see him, if he shall arrive?” said the desperately concerned Herr Wenck, horrified anew at increasing disasters in the recalcitrance of the “Princess,” whose conduct was immeasurably distressing. “Is not his royal regard, the gravity of the alliance — If he shall not induce your return, what hope has Hertzegotha?”

Both Alice and Thurley were amply aware of his mental and patriotic agony. Their sympathy could scarcely have been withheld, so fearfully earnest was his pain.

“He may not come,” said Thurley. “Really, I know nothing of his movements at all, nothing save what the papers here have printed.”

“We have reason to believe he is soon to arrive,” Herr Wenck informed her decisively. “If it is only your promise I may take that you will grant him audience, should he present himself, I shall a little feel encouraged and much experience gratification.”

Thurley glanced at Alice, who, having at first view feared the danger of such a contretemps, and almost

as swiftly concluded that the Duke, should he come, would be the last to divulge the facts which, of course, he must instantly discover. Her nod was the slightest possible gesture of the head. The eyes of Herr Wenck and his companion were fixed beseechingly on Thurley.

She faced them again, a lovely flush of color creeping round her throat to inundate her cheeks. "If he wishes to come and see me here, perhaps he may," she answered tremulously, tingling and alarmed at the prospect; "but you may be disappointed by results."

"But your love of the Fatherland!" said Wenck passionately, his eyes and voice abruptly flooded with tears. "Your eversung nobility of character, your loyalty to all that is good and dutiful! These you cannot abandon! Some exalted purpose you are doubtless serving; but the call of the home land, the whispers of ancestors long silent in honorable graves, the voice of Hertzegotha's traditions, the love of your people, — these — these you cannot help but hear! And your heart must answer! Turn again — and your longing take you home!" He broke down, and Thurley and Alice were profoundly affected. His evident anxiety and country love were singularly poignant.

His comrade still stared straight ahead, his face galvanically twitching. There was silence for a minute which seemed tremendously protracted.

"Forgive me if I have erred!" begged the man, controlling his emotions by an effort. "It was my heart that spoke, not my office. With your promise to see your noble fiancé, should he appear, I am content." He advanced and, kneeling by the chair where Thurley had suddenly risen, took her hand in both of his own and once more raised it to his lips.

And when they were gone, leaving visions of the profoundest bows and a backing out at the door, Alice and Thurley stood still silent and motionless, groping for wits a trifle scattered.

Then a characteristic Alice-ism snapped the tension. "Whew!" she said, "the soup thickens!"

"Alice," said Thurley, "what on earth are we going to do?"

Alice smiled and shrugged her shoulders. "Wait till we come to the bridge before we cross it."

"But this Grand Duke of — something or other would know in a minute that there was nothing royal in my blood."

"I am not at all convinced of that," said Alice sagely; "but whatever he discovers, mark my word, he will keep to himself."

Thurley was silent for a moment. "Poor Herr Wenck!" she finally observed. "It seems too bad to let him deceive himself so utterly; but what in the world could I do? Where do you suppose the real Princess Thirvinia is hiding?"

"How long she will keep it up is the question that bothers me," said Alice honestly. "As it is at present, we are having all the fun."

"Yes," said Thurley in her philosophic wisdom, "and we may have to pay all the price."

Her speech was amazingly prophetic.

## CHAPTER XXII

### LADY BOUNTIFUL

SATURDAY morning brought Thurley a second letter from her cousin. It was short and weakly scrawled; but yet sufficed to arouse a deep and insistent sense of shame in the breast of the generous girl. Her cousin was ill and in want. She had been for a week almost abandoned, too exhausted and afflicted to write, and hopeless with loneliness and the barren prospect of the future. She mentioned the fact that she had written before; but feared the letter had failed to reach its destination. Should this one share a similar fate, she knew not what to do.

A burning little accusation seared its way to Thurley's heart. She had first neglected, then forgotten, that first appeal, absolutely. Engrossed with the joys and ecstasies of her own altered circumstances, she had carelessly permitted the lodgment of a heartless disregard of everyone else in the world, she told herself severely, for which she was heartily ashamed.

She resolved to go to Edith at once, with material as well as personal comfort. And then she realized the danger of overdoing the rôle of Lady Bountiful, should she dare appear in any capacity save that of another fellow toiler with at most the savings of her hire. The wise thing to do was to take the case to Alice. This she did, and that wide hearted friend of the race was immediately ready with assistance.

"You have never thrown away that suit you wore while working for the Major," she said. "Just put that on, and James can drive you to the Major's office. I'll ask him to take you to the house where your cousin lives, leaving you, of course, at the door, and returning in half an hour at most to escort you away again."

"But why not let me run over to the Madison Avenue cars and go down there by myself?" said Thurley. "As long as I'm just a plain American girl, why take all that needless trouble?"

"Very well," said Alice: "Take as much money as you like, my dear, so long as it doesn't appear unreasonable. And try to induce your cousin to leave New York — go to Lakewood, or Atlantic City — for an absolute change and rest. Tell her a friend of yours, of a philanthropic turn of mind, has heard her story and agreed to help you bear the expense."

A strange little feeling of impending fates attacked Thurley's heart as she put away her dainty morning costume, robed herself like a drab Cinderella returning to her ashes, and left the gorgeous palace for an excursion to a part of town long since abandoned to the needs of those to whom bare existence is a problem. She bore two parcels in her arms, one of fruit and one of flowers. Someway, she felt as if something might occur whereby she would never more regain the splendid realm where chance and Alice had placed her.

How much she loved this newer life could scarcely have been reckoned. To surrender it now would be almost more than her eager heart could support. And yet she did not hesitate to continue on her way with her customary courage. She did not know that barely be-

hind her loitered a man whose business it was to keep her in view and report her every action to the woman of the ice cold eyes, seen and dreaded at the Horse Show.

When she boarded the car the man had already swung to the step, exciting no suspicion in her mind. He sat half the car length away, apparently reading a paper, but never for a second failing to keep her in the focus of his vision.

When at last she rose to alight at one of the overcrowded streets between 14th and 23d, the shadow departed by the exit at the front of the car and managed to let her overtake and pass him before he moved, when he crossed the street and appeared to be studying the numbers of the houses as he quietly followed.

When she rang at and entered the door of one of the old-fashioned brownstone houses, in a room of which her cousin was slowly convalescing from nervous complications and fever, the man in the street, all eagerness to inform his confederates of Thurley's whereabouts, dared not for a moment leave the neighborhood, lest she presently emerge from the building and be lost at once to view.

Thurley found Miss Steck much reduced, yet able to be up and about the house in a languid, dispirited manner. Edith was thoroughly astonished to see her thus appear, having written as before to New Haven, in the absence of definite knowledge as to where her cousin might be found.

"Why, Thurley!" she cried, when the door opened, admitting her rosy-cheeked visitor. "Oh, I never was so glad to see anybody in all my life!" And breaking down at once, she cried uncontrollably, Thurley mean-

time having quickly advanced, to throw her arms supportingly about her and draw her snugly against her sympathetic bosom.

"There, there!" she said coaxingly. "You poor dear girl! I just got your letter this morning. It came to the office; so I asked permission to come just as soon as I could."

Edith was older than herself and only girlish now in her helplessness; yet to neither girl did the situation seem the least incongruous, Thurley was so entirely her cousin's superior.

"I didn't think I had a friend in the world," said Edith, continuing weak, and shaken by the sobs of her sudden relaxation from the courage with which she had fought out her lonely battle. "I wrote you once before; but the letter must have gone astray. I saw someone a little like you, and thought I'd give the world just to look at you again. And then I became ill. I thought I should die, and wished I might. The world is so full of women that nobody needs! But I won't be lugubrious, Thurley—I really won't. God bless you for coming so quickly!"

A new tide of shame swept upward from Thurley's heart, thus to be praised where she should be blamed, but she sat her cousin down and kissed away her tears, then started a lively fusillade of cheers and questions, while tearing the paper from three giant chrysanthemums and plunging their stems into a vase of broken crockery that stood on a dingy mantel shelf.

"It's a wonder we haven't met before," she said. "I began to work in a down-town office away back in the early part of the summer. But a lot of the writing was the sort I could do at home, and I was lonely, too,

and trying to save my salary as much as possible; so I didn't attempt to go out very much. And New York is a great big place, anyway, and horrid, some parts of it. And you've got to promise me right this minute you'll go down to Lakewood or Atlantic City; for a lady I know insisted upon it the very first thing, when I told her about you this morning, and I've brought you the money to pay all expenses for six or eight weeks or more."

Edith sat up and stared. "Thurley Ruxton," she gasped, "what in the world are you talking about, I'd like to know? I? Go away like that?"

"Certainly," said Thurley. "Don't you want to?"

Edith almost collapsed upon her breast in happiness and the sudden vanishment of struggle. She cried again; but softly now, and in a manner to comfort her being. "You're taking your own precious money!" she said. "If you are, you sha'n't! I'll never budge a step; for I know how hard it is to earn!"

"I'm not," said Thurley, who had never felt a sense of actual ownership in the fortune placed at her order in the bank. "If you don't accept this offer cheerfully and bravely, recognizing one woman's right in helping another, I shall be ashamed ever to ask the giver again, and you don't know what you may spoil for other girls."

"It seems too good to be true," said Edith, attempting a wistful smile. "What good would it do if I took your earnings, Thurley, and then later on you should be in this condition yourself?" She waved her hand weakly to indicate the shabbiness of the apartment.

"We'll not talk about that," was Thurley's answer. "I've been halfway promised that you shall have an



easy position at a decent salary, whenever you're well enough to come back to New York and accept it. But the very first thing is to get you out of here and off, where the change will be complete. If you think you can go this afternoon, the fairy godmother said she'd send round a carriage to drive you to the station. I'll send you in a number of things she said you'd better have."

Again Edith stared in wan incredulity, her hollow eyes big with astonishment. "Why — but think of the money all that means!" she exclaimed. "How does it happen? How did you find her? Think of the trust she must have in — Thurley, she must love you, I'm sure, love you dearly, as everyone does you've ever known! Perhaps you can't tell me much about her — they so rarely wish to be known. But, oh, I think it's beautiful to be loved as they all love you!"

Thurley remained for about two hours, and departed then at Edith's reiterated wish. The girl who had found the world so hard was oversolicitous lest her cousin abuse the privilege granted by some generous employer who had released her for the morning. Recurrent waves of conscious guilt at her inability to be absolutely frank and honest a little marred Thurley's pleasure and gnawed rather deep, especially at her cousin's appreciation of all she was attempting at last to do. Nevertheless, the affection she bestowed was genuine, as her sympathy was true, and when she had gone she was happier by far than for any day since Edith's first letter had come.

With lavish hand and a purse of magic resourcefulness she ordered outfits to be sent to the house that had harbored care. She was followed persistently, wherever

she traveled, by the man who had hung upon her trail. When at length she went home, a tired, gleeful little person, with at least the heart of a happy Princess in her bosom, the man was tremendously relieved. He hastened away at once, to report the unusual occurrences which supplied the first hope to a little clique of beings abnormally engrossed in the movements and doings of Alice Van Kirk's protégée.

Edith departed in the afternoon; but not before a representative delegated by the clique in question had made an excuse to call, offer further aid and friendship, and thereby secure in Thurley's cousin a possible agent for future exploitation. A woman, wholly unknown to Miss Steck, was then instructed to follow the girl to Lakewood, whither she was going, and remain there, keeping her constantly in view and if possible gain her trust and friendship.

Edith had agreed to write to her cousin at Major Phipps's address — and thereby hangs a tale. Alice, having for some unknown reason undergone a certain worry in Thurley's absence, was not only inordinately pleased to see her return in such excellent spirits, but was likewise thoroughly glad that Edith Steck was to go.

"She must rest for at least two months," she said at the end of Thurley's story. "New York and she are better far apart. She might even secure a nice position down there in the pines. I think perhaps she will."

She made a note of the possibility, which thereupon became a highly probable development, when the moment should advise that Edith Steck had better be detained away from the Kingdom of Princess Thirvinia.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### THE SOUP THICKENS MORE

THE next few days developed a number of factors, excitements, and skirmishes leading toward things climacteric.

Thurley and Alice had never been so completely engrossed with social functions and diversions. On two successive nights they attended the opera, both occasions being notable for brilliance and increasing furore of the socially elect over the many appearances of the "Princess," the persistence with which Alice Van Kirk evaded any and all allusions to her guest's identity, and the unanimous infatuation of all the men permitted to come within her circle.

Annoyances by the daily press, sufficiently persistent from the first, were rapidly multiplied as reporters, camera demons, and ridiculous rumors hung upon Thurley's movements night and day.

Despite it all, she rode her horse three mornings, fairly early, accompanied by her groom on two excursions. The hour she chose was one in which the park was practically deserted by the smarter set, who frequently ride for display. But the newspaper men were on hand the second morning, while on the third Kelsey Wood "accidentally" appeared in the saddle path, galloped to her side, and improved the opportunity for which he had longed with a cheer she could not have discouraged.

The news of Wood's clever maneuver came duly to the ears of Thurley's other suitors and aroused a storm of jealousy and counter scheming. Fiaschi was irritated, Gaillard was particularly incensed. The Count was no rider, but feared and hated horses; while the college man felt that his special license, granting him exclusive rights, had been unwarrantably violated.

The tact and diplomacy of both Alice and Thurley were taxed to the utmost to maintain an armistice and avert internecine strife. Almost like apportionments of pie, the hours of Thurley's day and evening were sliced and awarded to her clamorous swains, to keep them from ravening starvation. To Fiaschi fell a night with Thurley at the opera. Gaillard drove with the "Princess," in her own victoria, six or eight times round the park. Stuyverant came to dine at the royal palace and sat with Thurley alone for nearly an hour afterward.

The Count, during the long and passionate love scene depicted in "Tristan und Isolde," made a murmured declaration of his burning love and demanded Thurley's hand in marriage. Gaillard, oblivious to all the world of carriages and people about them, announced his disgust with all her other various suitors, reminded Thurley of their past relationship, and desired her consent forthwith to an announcement of their engagement. Stuyverant, alone of the three, behaved himself like a rational being.

How she had parried the thrusts of the Count's Vesuvian flames, or the jibes of Gaillard's resentful impatience, Thurley could scarcely have told. She only knew that Fiaschi had become intolerable, the maker of college widows impossible, and that neither had re-

ceived satisfaction, though neither had been further incensed or even made wholly hopeless or unmollified.

In such a game as she was playing, and engaged with such elements as Gaillard and his business partner presented, such timid and gentlemanly courtiers as Stetson, the Beau, the Captain, Dearborn, and even Kelsey Woods, were hopelessly distanced. Had it not been for constant intercessions in their behalf on the part of Alice, these less aggressive suitors, with half a dozen more of similar caliber, must have suffered all but absolute annihilation.

Stuyverant, occupying a position unique among them all, yet unaware of the sheer relief with which Thurley turned to him as often as the game would permit, continued to be sorely puzzled by it all, while plunging more and more helplessly in love with the girl to whom he felt he had been guided by the Fates.

There were times when it seemed impossible to acquit her of utter heartlessness, times when he felt convinced that she had come to America, not to make an alliance, but merely to practice arts grown weary in conquest at the court of Hertzegotha. And if it should prove that she was merely amusing herself with them all, himself included, he could not see how beauty, graciousness, impulsive generosity, or any other of her many bewitching qualities, could sufficiently excuse her conduct. Nevertheless, he confessed to himself that he had rather have known her even thus than never to have met her at all.

Meantime, independently of Thurley's actions or wishes in the matter, Fiaschi and Gaillard were arming for a bitter struggle that bore on events not yet even shadowed in the day. Each, having recognized in the other an insistent and tenacious rival for Thurley's final

favor, had determined to exercise any possible advantage for his opponent's overthrow.

The difference between the Anglo-Saxon and the Latin temperament was herein nicely illustrated. They were business associates, working together for a common end that should benefit them both. This to Gaillard was entirely apart from their sentimental battle, and sacred to business ethics and honor. To Fiaschi it was one more element for a possible crushing of the enemy. Gaillard would have felt entire justification in attacking the Count from a moral or a physical viewpoint, and leaving him with either a crippled body or a shattered reputation, while still maintaining the strictest scruples in their deal, which centered in the Street. The Spanish-Italian, on the other hand, was already deliberately planning his rival's financial ruin, through treachery to their business agreement. He would gladly have stripped Acton Gaillard of name, honor, funds, or physical prowess, and to some such end he was bending all his forces, fiercely determined as he was to win the object of his covetous passions.

Wednesday of that eventful week was scheduled for developments disturbing and sensational. Thurley returned to the avenue home at four in the afternoon from a drive with Lady Honore Calthorp and Kelsey Woods, expecting to dress for afternoon tea and be driven to a rendezvous with Alice, that they might proceed together to Mrs. Ashley Duane's.

She found a note on her table, addressed in the once familiar hand of Acton Gaillard. It was brief but charged with significance:

You evaded my proposal and gave me no definite answer

in the park. I wish to know, once for all and without delay, Will you be my wife? My sort of love can endure no more of this suspense and torture. With vivid memories of the things that have been,

Ever indulgently and longingly yours,

ACTON.

The threat was there, veiled, but none the less apparent to her keen perceptive faculties, and Thurley was perturbed to the depths of her girlishly timid heart.

She had hoped to postpone this too definite issue, — hold Gaillard away as she held the others, according to her promise made to Alice. Her impulse from the first had been to tell him precisely what he was and dismiss him forever from her life. She realized her helplessness, however, and the power of his knowledge of the past. She was vexed and frightened together, loathing the man for attempting to take this advantage of the situation, yet afraid to answer to his curt demand with the scorn and indignation that he had always merited. She was wholly unstrung, especially in the absence of Alice, on whom she had learned to lean for the wisdom and calm of her ripened worldliness.

She still stood unmoving, the letter in her hand, while her maids, Annette and Sophie, were patiently awaiting her pleasure to be dressed, when one of the servants knocked at the door and delivered a card, which Sophie received and carried at once to her mistress.

Thurley took it mechanically, glanced at the name, and suddenly felt a new sensation of wonder. On the card was written, in a woman's hand:

Countess Viziano y Fiaschi.

She turned to her maid, wholly unable to understand the meaning of the situation. "You are sure this card was for me?"

"Yes, Mam'selle."

A weight as of something ominous seemed hovering oppressively in the air. A sense as of disturbing revelations, or even menace, in this unexpected visit, took possession of her mind. Who the Countess could be and what the purpose of her appearance thus, were beyond her powers of conjecture. She reflected rapidly that a scene might be impending, and a feverish wish for Alice increased her indecision.

Flashes of intuition laid bare startling thoughts in swiftly moving progression. Whence, unexpectedly, came her courage, and even a desire to behold this mysterious visitor, she could not herself have determined. She merely knew, abruptly, that to see this Countess might even be a duty to them all.

"You may wait," she said to the expectant maids, and proceeded lightly down the stairs.

A moment later she entered the reception room, and a small, dark-eyed young woman, flaming both inwardly and outwardly, rose from a chair to confront her.



## CHAPTER XXIV

### A SINGULAR ALLIANCE

FOR a moment Thurley and her visitor stood face to face, each taking, as it were, mental measurement of the other.

Thurley was the first to speak. "You wished to see me?"

The breath of the Countess was coming rapidly, as the agitated rise and fall of her bosom sufficiently advertised. She spoke in French. "You are Princess Thirvinia, known here in New York as Miss Thurley?"

"I am known here in New York, as Miss Thurley, certainly. Do you not speak English?" Thurley answered. "Will you not be seated and state your errand with me as promptly as possible?"

The young woman made no response to either query. She stared at the "Princess" with blazing, resentful eyes, while her color disappeared, robbing her face of something suggestive of damask smoothness, bloom, and texture. She was on the whole a striking little person, with a piquant attractiveness that was emphasized by a nose slightly retroussé and a vivid bit of coral mouth.

"You are very beautiful!" she said, as if reluctantly admitting an inescapable fact, or even making an accusation. "What right have you to follow my husband to America? He is my husband, and you shall not entice him away!"

Thurley elevated her brows. "Who is he, then? If you refer to Count Fiaschi —"

"You know I refer to Count Fiaschi!" interrupted the fiery little parcel of Gallicism. "Do you think Countess Fiaschi shall be his mother? Do I look like that? He shall be my husband — all! He is not to be shared with any German Princess! You will find I am not so small in my rights!"

Thurley was far from being awed. She might have been near to amusement, had not the affair partaken of too much gravity. "I have no wish to share your husband," she said. "I was not aware he had a wife, nor have I followed anyone here from Europe."

Magnificent scorn was massed upon the piquant little face. "Ah! When all this land is talking of his madness for yourself. Perhaps you will deny you are Princess Thirvinia, whose golden-haired spell was cast about him on the Continent?"

"I am sorry if you do not believe what I say," said Thurley quietly. "I am glad you came, glad to know the Count is married, glad to tell you I despise him, — dislike him exceedingly, more than ever now, since this reveals him in a new and unsuspected meanness of spirit. I will give you any comfort you desire so far as he is concerned."

Her visitor gazed at her almost blankly, so vast was her incredulity. "Despise him — any woman, despise him," she said, "with his soul, his fire, his sentiment?" Then she suddenly broke down and wept as pent heavens sometimes weep when a storm has massed their tears. "You are beautiful," she repeated; "but I believe you. I want your help. I came for your assistance; not to accuse, to implore. I am not so beautiful

as you; but yet I love him. Perhaps this is my curse. Who knows? I must love him, nevertheless! I would die for his joy. He is more needful to me than my soul, more to be desired than salvation! If you do not love him, tell him so, drive him away, and he will come to me for the kisses he says are sweet! You will despise him, Princess — you will promise this?"

"With all my heart," said Thurley honestly. "Whatsoever may seem to be my attitude, you may be sure I shall despise him and do all in my power to send him away as soon as possible."

"It shall be soon?" implored the thoroughly altered little being. "I am his true and lawful wife, though he wish to divorce me through a purchased dispensation."

Thurley felt a woman's sympathy welling in her breast for this desperately tortured little Countess, even as something akin to rage or indignation at Fiaschi surged in her veins. She continued upon the subject now for the gratification of both emotions.

"You were married abroad?"

"In Paris — and three months later he saw you, Princess! And I have hated you till now."

"You came with him here to New York?"

"I came alone!" declared the little being, dashing away her tears of resentment at the treatment of which her husband had been guilty. "He shall not know that I am here till you send him away, and in his wounded heart he shall wish for the soothing of my love! Perhaps you will help me, let me know when you shall tell him to depart."

"Perhaps I may," said Thurley. "Will you trust

me a little, give me time, believe me, though I may find myself obliged to see him even frequently again?"

"If you shall not learn to love him," said the Countess, smiling wistfully, "I can wait nearly all my life. I could almost wait to have him at last in Heaven; but — Mary forgive me! — this life is a little more sure. You will surely continue to hate him always as now?"

"Perhaps even more," was Thurley's answer. "I'd like to be your friend."

She offered her hand. With another burst of uncontrollable tears the little flame incarnate sank on her knees as she took it and pressed it against her cheek.

"I came to hate — and I must love you!" she said. "To think I can be so glad to leave all my happiness, my hope, my life, in your keeping! You will not forget, I know!" She staggered to her feet and went blindly groping for the door.

## CHAPTER XXV

### A DUKE IMPENDING

THURLEY was presently back in her room; but not to be dressed for tea. She was far too disturbed by what she had learned to think of anything save the necessity of seeing Alice alone at the earliest possible moment.

She sat before a dressing case; but had waved her maids away. She was staring idly at the fineries intended for the afternoon. Fiaschi, she knew, would be at Mrs. Ashley Duane's, and the thought of beholding the man again was revolting to all her nature.

What Alice would say, or do, after this, she could not venture to predict. Alice had hoped for the fellow's punishment before, yet felt a certain necessity for the retention of his friendship because of invaluable social connections, long coveted, and already firmly established through the medium he represented. But a new and shameful gravity attached to this latest development of the nobleman's nature and schemes, and continued relations with him now were fraught with highly explosive possibilities.

At five o'clock Alice, a trifle disturbed by Thurley's non-appearance at the Duanes', was driven home, to find that the "Princess," overwrought and afflicted with a slight nervous headache, had gone to lie down and had readily fallen asleep.

At half past five, with the wintry darkness closing down on the avenue, and all the house lights softly

glowing, the third sensation scheduled for the day had its formal introduction.

A messenger arrived and delivered a letter. It was addressed to Madame Van Kirk and "Miss Thurley," and bore a coat of arms. The messenger waited for an answer.

Alice tore the envelope apart and read as follows:

Honored Madam and Honored Miss Thurley.—May I so bold presume myself as to inform you his Excellency Karl-Wilhelm-Herman, Grand Duke of Saxe Hertze and Heimer, has in New York arrived, and of an audience with Miss Thurley is anxiously desiring, praying to be informed on this messenger if he may not at your dwelling present himself in this evening, by the hour of eight o'clock and one half.

Obediently your humble servant,

OTTO WENCK.

"Good Lord!" said Alice. "And the child asleep!"

But Thurley was presently very much awake.

The messenger had been ushered in to wait.

"To-night!" said Thurley, to whom the situation had been made intelligible through three repetitions and a quick perusal of the note. "What in the world will happen. What shall we say?"

"What can we do but face the music?" Alice answered. "We're playing a game of consequences, and the penalties must be met. Personally, I like Grand Dukes. It makes me wish that I were young and standing in your shoes. At least you'll admit, my dear, that his Excellency will be a relief from some of the others about us here. I only hope he isn't old!"

Thurley was suddenly jolted back to the occurrences of the afternoon. The color crept upward toward her

forehead. "Oh, I've wanted and needed you so!" she said. "Alice, what do you think? Acton Gaillard has written, demanding an announcement of his engagement to me, and Count Fiaschi's wife was here at four o'clock, charging me with having followed the horrid creature from Europe!"

Alice fairly gasped. "His wife?"

"There's her card." Thurley took it from the dressing stand and placed it in Alice's half-paralyzed fingers. "I thought at first she might stab me or something, she appeared so furiously excited. And now a Grand Duke on the scene!" She tried to smile; but the situation was not altogether humorous.

"Oh, well, Deary, what is the use?" said Alice, desperately resigned to anything, and shrugging her shoulders with more than her customary eloquence. "If it's coming upon us in landslides, why do anything but grin and try to remain on top as long as possible? Fiaschi—the brute! Gaillard—the heavyweight champion! Karl-Wilhelm—the lovelorn Viking, if he isn't old and doddering, as Dukes have a habit of becoming! Oh, Virtue, where is thy sting? My dear, we're in for it, both of us together! Let's plunge!"

Thurley looked at her helplessly. "We'd better see the Duke?"

"See him and raise his ante," answered Alice recklessly. "The Lord only knows what may happen next! It may serve our purposes tremendously to have him on the string."

"But he'll know," said Thurley, smiling despite her doubts and vague alarms. "We have to remember that."

"Why not ignore it, my dear?"

Thurley made a gesture of acceptance. "And after that — what about Acton Gaillard and the Count?"

"Oh, the Count! We'll grill the Count when the proper time arrives! Leave him to me!" Alice rose and paced the floor in growing indignation. "He has simply got to be trussed and roasted for this!" she continued. "I hope you'll do everything possible — everything that a nice, affronted girl can do — to lead him to a deadfall and let me drop it on his pneumo-gastly nerve! As for Acton — did you say he dared to write?"

Thurley took the letter from a drawer and delivered it silently. Alice read it twice in half a minute. "The fool!" she said. "He's trapped himself. You can do as you please with Acton after this!"

"I don't see exactly. It seemed to me his threat is more obvious than before."

"But don't you discern, dear child, that this is a written proposal for your hand, that after this he simply cannot afford to retail a story of your college widowhood, and all the rest? How would it look, in the light of this documentary evidence of his wish to have you for a wife, for him to say, 'She is nobody — just an ordinary, pretty girl I knew in New Haven as a tutor?' Don't you see he has spiked his own guns, placed himself quite at our mercy?"

Thurley looked at her steadily, while the truth of these conclusions became a little less hazy. "I never thought of that, of course. You are sure he wouldn't dare begin to — tell things now?"

"Acton Gaillard — with his vanity? Dear me! There's that messenger sitting down stairs all this time — and the poor Grand Duke somewhere fraying out his



boots with impatience, tramping up and down! Oh, heavens! I hope he doesn't wobble! I'll write the note myself, and you can sign it with me if you wish."

In her active way she swooped down at the exquisite desk that stood by the window and began at once to write.

Thurley felt a recurrence of her former fever. Her heartbeat quickened. "You are going to tell him to come?"

"On the run," said Alice, scribbling rapidly. "I wish I could set his clock ahead!" She concluded her note in the briefest time and blotting it, held it up to read. "This is what I've said:

His Excellency will be most cordially welcome at the home of Mrs. Van Kirk, at the hour of eight-thirty, by Miss Thurley and Mrs. Van Kirk. Ever faithfully yours, — and so forth. Of course I get in twice to your once, my dear, but only in the note. If I had the time and the literary genius, I'd write it less awkwardly. Shall I put in your love for Karl?"

"Yes," said Thurley, "and a garnishment of parsley. I'm glad somebody's enjoying all the fun I'm going to have."

"Dear child!" said Alice, impulsively affectionate at once. "Would you have hesitated to play your rôle had you known of all the things that were coming?"

"This may be only the introduction," answered Thurley in her girlishly prophetic manner; "but, no matter what may come, so long as I continue to please you, keep a little of your present feeling of interest and friendship, I shall never regret it for a moment."

"It's a feeling of love," said Alice, and she kissed the girl impulsively.

## CHAPTER XXVI

### A ROYAL SUITOR

It was half past eight. "Wait till I get my breath," said Thurley, pausing with Alice on the stairs. "My heart is nearly breaking through."

"So is mine," replied the fairy godmother, "for fear the Duke may totter with age. An old one might not understand a joke. I have given him absent treatment for an hour to make him young."

Her treatment may and may not have been responsible; but the Duke was young.

"Thank heaven!" she said to herself when they entered the room with its brilliant lights and the richness of its furnishings and beheld their royal visitor, uniformed, decorated, resplendent, standing with easy military grace to bow them into his presence.

He was barely more than a boy,—a tall, slender youngling of a long succession of Kaisers, fine featured, proud, as rosy as a girl, and adorned with a dark and downy mustachelet, singularly becoming in the emphasis it lent to his lip.

Instructed as to what she ought to do at once, Thurley approached their noble visitor in her gracious, half shy manner. Impelled by the dictates of her impulse, she held out her hand.

The Duke had immediately raised his eyes to regard her as she came. A light of amazement, a shadowy

puzzlement, and a blaze of sheer, uncontrollable admiration flashed in quick succession from the penetrative gaze he bent upon her — and Alice beheld it all.

Neither she nor Thurley had more than discerned that Otto Wenck, purple with excitement and solicitude, was present, a little apart.

In the utmost candor Thurley placed her hand in that of the Duke and met the concentrated scrutiny of his eyes. "I am Miss Thurley," she said in German that flowed from her lips as water in a rill. "May I assure you of your welcome and express my pleasure at our meeting?"

"You — you have given me more — more than you may possibly derive from this happy occasion," he told her in a boyish murmur, charged with grace and self control; and, lifting her hand to his lips he kissed it softly, then gazed as before in the liquid depths of her glance.

"May I present my — my fairy godmother?" said Thurley, turning to Alice. "Mrs. Van Kirk."

The Duke advanced to exchange a formal salutation with his hostess and to murmur some conventional ritual of pleasure. Alice, thoroughly equal to the moment, beamed her brightest, made an engagingly American reply of welcome, and tactfully abandoned the pair at once, to proceed where Wenck was still engorged with official worry, to set him more at ease.

Thurley had wished for assistance, support, in her trying situation. The Duke, on the contrary, seemed enormously relieved to behold Alice fade to the background.

"It is a great surprise to find you here," he said, which might have meant almost anything, as Thurley

was amply aware. He added, "It is also a very great pleasure. I could not have believed this meeting would so restore my happiness."

"May I not beg you to be seated?" said Thurley. She was more and more puzzled by his attitude, and was swiftly wondering if such a thing could be possible as self delusion on the part of such a fiancé, and if, mayhap, he had been engaged without previously meeting Princess Thirvinia. She continued nervously, "You arrived in New York this week?"

"To-day," said the Duke, accepting a chair and gazing with ill concealed rapture on Thurley's face. "I confess my impatience to see — I am incredibly grateful for this early opportunity of discovering — will you accept my declaration of very great joy at this meeting?"

Thurley reddened with exquisite fire. "It is likewise a pleasure to me," she told him candidly, still unable to determine precisely the state of his mind and knowledge. "It is a greater pleasure than I had — We were a little prepared for your coming, by Herr Wenck."

He leaned a little toward her. "You had not anticipated a little pleasure in my arrival, then?"

She laughed lightly, the color playing in her face as the perfume plays about a rose. "Isn't it sufficient that I betray my pleasure now?"

"You knew I had come a very great distance, that my action was perhaps without precedent, in my anguished search for — for the beautiful — for the mate my heart would select?"

Thurley nodded, crimsoning anew at the ardor and frankness of his gaze. "I knew you were coming —

knew Hertzegotha is — quite a long way off. I knew that, of course.”

“May I ask you other questions — personal questions?”

“Why — certainly — if you do not require that I shall answer — unless I please.”

He smiled. “Do I seem like that? It is not so much that I wish to ask — so much to you, perhaps; but — Shall you insist that I call you always ‘Miss Thurley’ — never ‘Princess’?”

She was greatly confused. “Why, we — I — we have desired everyone to call me Miss Thurley. Do you mind?”

“Could not I alone call you Princess?” Brightness and ardor were dancing in his glance.

She was more than ever plunged in doubt as to what and how much or how little he had guessed, or what could be the meaning of his words. “You alone?” she echoed.

“I alone — Princess. You have not called me Karl.”

The tide of her color swept upward in her throat and cheeks till the young Duke felt his soul madly beating its wings. Thurley thought if he knew her for other than the Princess he was quite disloyal to the absent lady and bold in his wooing of another.

“Why, but — how could — why should — If you called me so — ”

He was still leaning toward her eagerly. He interrupted her halting, stumbling utterance. His query was astonishingly frank, “Have you engaged yourself to marry someone here?”

“Why — no — I — your Excellency doesn’t — ”

"You will not, then? Instead, you will think of Hertzegotha as —"

It was Alice who came to the rescue. With increasing alarm and wonder she had noted the trend of the young Duke's bearing and had barely restrained an earlier impulse to terminate the interview.

"Oh, your Excellency," she said, as she came in all innocence across the room, "how very interesting your trip across the water must have been! Herr Wenck informs me you saw three whales and several schools of porpoises — or did he see them himself?"

"Yes, yes — pardon," ventured the fiery faced Wenck desperately from his stand where Alice had left him. "It was I."

"I saw nothing," said the Duke. "I was too unhappy; but to-night —"

"Some of us are very poor sailors," Alice interrupted graciously. "I shouldn't be able to see anything but a continent, and I'm not at all certain of that. You know, in strict duty, your Excellency, I am constrained to ask you our stereotyped question: 'How do you like New York?' We always ask that of persons who have been five minutes ashore."

The Duke received her query with gravity. "At noon I detested all America; to-night your city has my love."

"Bravo!" said Alice. "We shall hope to keep you long."

The Duke was quick for one so young. "It would be a great pleasure to receive your impressions of Hertzegotha — yours and those of Miss Thurley."

Alice smiled. "You return very soon?"

The Duke glanced at Thurley, as honestly as a boy. "So much depends upon — circumstances over which I have not entire control. May I beg, in the meantime, the honor of presenting myself not infrequently here?"

A certain naïveté and directness of the Duke's request appealed to Alice instantly. She too was puzzled, not entirely certain of his knowledge or ignorance of the facts concerning Thurley, whom she had heard him address as "Princess." She did comprehend that love at first sight, or something closely allied thereto, had conquered his heart, if he had, as she had expected he would, immediately discerned that Thurley was not his fiancée. She foresaw, also, if this was the case, a safeguard for her little ruse, if not a confirmation of the claim New York had made concerning her protégée, and that complications loomed ahead in a none too quieting manner.

Alice was essentially dogged and persistent. The element whereby defeat is so often accepted had been forgotten in her composition. She had courage the equal of Thurley's, plus a certain deliberate calmness that Thurley might never acquire. She glanced discerningly as far ahead as uncertain lights permitted now, in the second that elapsed before she answered.

"It gives me great happiness to know you wish to honor us by returning to us here," she told the young Duke gravely. "I am sure it will be Miss Thurley's wish, as well as my own, to extend the utmost of our hospitality and confess the pleasure we shall derive from every such attention as this to-night."

Thurley could have gasped; but she suppressed the lightest sound. It seemed to her that Alice was indeed plunging into difficulties by adopting this generous

course. Whatever the knowledge of the Duke concerning herself and her "royal" character, she was quite aware he was early manifesting symptoms that threatened one more reckless suitor on the scene. Yet she found herself obliged to admit that no other course seemed open, so long as Alice adhered to the game upon which they had entered. They were practically obliged to see his Excellency as often as he might choose to appear — or cut him off at once.

The Duke himself contributed a trifle more to the strength of Alice's position — or perhaps to Thurley's predicament. He turned to the girl deliberately. "And may I believe that you also, Princess, — Miss Thurley, — share in this sentiment of welcome?"

"Why — certainly," she faltered. "I shall hope to see you as often as Alice — as often as you care — as often as it gives you pleasure to — please us by coming."

It was not at all what she had wished to say, except in its general effect. She knew it was just about what Alice had expected, and saw that it lighted new beacons of fire in the eyes of the youthful Duke.

Alice, for her part, aware that their royal visitor was about to depart, innocently drifted at once to the lonely Wenck, whose official solicitude had apparently been soothed.

Karl-Wilhelm was encouragingly prompt to take advantage of her thoughtfulness. He held out his hand and tingled mightily at the contact of Thurley's rosy fingers.

"To-night it is *auf wiedersehen*," he murmured. "When I come again, Princess, will you welcome me with 'Karl'?"



"Perhaps we had better wait," said Thurley judicially, "and let the welcome come as it may."

"If it answers my heart, I shall be content," he told her in a murmur that Alice could not have heard. Then he kissed her hand as he had before and was presently gone on his way.

## CHAPTER XXVII

### WHAT WALLS MAY SEPARATE

ON Thursday morning, in the sunshine that broke through the mist and clouds of New York Harbor, fully two hours before noon, all the waterfront of Gotham was astonished and mystified by the sudden appearance of a sea-going yacht of extraordinary swiftness that set all the shipping tongues to wagging.

Almost simultaneously with the dropping of her anchor by the trim white visitor from somewhere out beyond, a rumor was started on its way to the press that Emperor Wilhelm's private yacht, with some great German personage aboard, perhaps even the Kaiser himself, incog, had quietly slipped up abreast of the New York Yacht Club moorage, after cleaving the gray Atlantic in almost record time, and was said to have come on an errand of state involving matters of most profound importance.

Rumors are amazing. Whence they start, how they travel, why they alter as they go, — these are queries for the probers of things psychological.

Before anything authentic could possibly be known of the slender bit of steel and power from overseas, the tales that had spread of her coming and her purpose contained a germ of truth. The vessel was owned in Germany and had frequently carried the Kaiser. The personage aboard her this morning had come in haste on matters of gravest moment to his state, and in pur-

suings the shadow of the mighty liner that had brought Karl-Wilhelm, Duke of Saxe Hertz and Heimer, to American shores, had closely approached the record.

The man aboard, however, was not from Wilhelm's imperial court. He came from Hertzegotha, seeking the youthful Duke and the still more youthful Princess, both truant from their fatherland and graying the hair of the elders left behind. He was a small, iron visaged being, an Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, that traveler, none other than Baron Von Hochhaus, of the Kingdom of Hertzegotha, Captain of the Cuirassier Regiment von Seydlitz, Equerry to H. R. H. Grand Duke of Hesse-Stuttgart, etc., etc., grown wrinkled and white of head in the service of his country.

He attracted little or no attention when he landed, the curious having prepared themselves to single out some giant of mere physical proportions to fulfill the expectations centered upon the important being of the rumor. With a courier to aid and further his movements, the servitor in question being a German familiar with Manhattan, he was presently driven in a taxicab to one of the smaller high class hotels between 23d and 42d streets, where he was sufficiently fortunate to surprise and detain Otto Wenck, once more a thoroughly worried individual who had "lost" the youthful Duke.

Threatened with apoplectic astonishment, thus to encounter so great a person, Wenck was barely able to believe his eyes when the Baron came upon him. He had never been so excited or congested with news and alarm in all his life.

"He is gone! Heaven must have sent you!" he exclaimed the moment he could gain sufficient breath to credit his senses. "I am beside myself with despair!"

The Baron eyed him for a moment narrowly. "Sit down, then!" he commanded quietly. "Permit your despair and your pulse to subside. By 'he,' I presume you refer to the Duke. He can scarcely have been here more than a day. He cannot have gone very far. You doubtless mean he has quitted your country. I shall not therefrom judge him so far insane — which has been a great temptation. You will kindly compose yourself sufficiently to relate to me, briefly and promptly, all that has happened since you were cabled to move in the matter of Princess Thirvinia."

Wenck sat down as directed. "He is not unhappy — his Excellency," he declared at once. "He altered so soon as he had seen her."

"Is this the cart or the horse you bring me first?" inquired the Baron incisively. "A detailed and chronological statement of your actions, the results and all developments, if you please, and without too great expenditure of time!"

With excitement not to be repressed, and with repetitions numerous and somewhat irritating to the Baron, Wenck proceeded to state every minute occurrence with which he had been in any manner concerned, in the matter of Princess Thirvinia, dwelling in great particularity on the visits to Thurley and Alice Van Kirk, both with and without the Grand Duke.

"Last night," he concluded, "his Excellency was amazingly light of heart and joyous with song. He had little to say, but much to sing. He gave me no intimation he should vanish from my watchful vision; but this morning he is gone from his quarters and I fear has, with a purpose to go his own ways, somewhere ensconced himself, with perhaps an altered name."

The Ambassador Plenipotentiary was somewhat grimly mollified. The affair, to him, looked far more promising than he and his peers of Hertzegotha had supposed would be possible. Since the Duke and the Princess had met and exchanged such manifestations of friendship, even her declaration of intent to remain away from home was a matter of minor importance.

He began at once a circumstantial examination of the agent to whom had been intrusted the conduct of affairs up to the moment when, on the Duke's disappearance on a vessel bound for America, he himself had been impressed to save the gravest situation in all the annals of the court.

Meantime, by one of those strange juggleries of chance, straight through on the opposite side of that same block of buildings, in an old fashioned residence, long since abandoned to the transient needs of a restless and dubious fragment of New York's population, another conference concerning Princess Thirvinia was in progress.

Three persons, one of whom had just arrived, occupied the large, dingy room, where an ancient fireplace and a frescoed ceiling attested the building's past grandeur. Two of the trio were men. The other was that same icy eyed woman who had stared at Thurley at the Horse Show. Her companions called her Madame Zagorsky. She was Russian, a nihilist, socialist, and selfist, of a type born for intrigue and adventure.

One of them was a German, the other a Slav named Pelevin. The German answered to the name of Max. It was he who had followed Alice and Thurley from the Garden, and had spied upon the "Princess" almost

constantly since. He had just returned from Lakewood, where Edith Steck had gone, his place at the avenue mansion having meantime been filled by a man for whom the three were at present waiting.

Madame Zagorsky was obviously master mind and master energy of all the combination. There were several other agents in the group, all diligently engaged with various details of the business in hand.

"If you have your breath," the woman said to Max, "will you condescend to inform us what you have done?"

The icy stare of her venomous eyes had frequently made the German uneasy, and his gaze dropped shiftily now as he panted for relief to his lungs. He had walked from the ferry and climbed three flights of stairs. "One moment, I tell you all," he panted. "I have done well."

"So say you," said the woman. "Then has this Miss Steck written at last — and have you fetched her letter that I may read it here?"

Max nodded. "I have the letter," and he took it from his pocket, to have it promptly snatched from his hand.

"An easy hand to forge," commented Madame Zagorsky, eying the direction on the envelope before she tore the letter open, to give it a hurried perusal.

"Ah! she improves in health already, does she? So!" The note was addressed to "Dear Lady Bountiful" and signed "Your happy Edith" only. "It is well we intercept this letter," continued Madame Zagorsky. "What think you, Pelevin? Have you a better plan than a letter like this to 'Miss Thurley,' inform-

ing her this Edith is robbed and very ill once more, and has returned and must ask that her benefactress come without delay?"

Pelevin cleared his throat. "Any plan — so that she comes. If she has once responded to this woman's appeal, she will doubtless respond again."

"This method is wise and safe," ventured Max, who had, as he said, done well. "Let us take all possible precautions; for the business is already sufficiently risky."

"It is sufficiently slow, this inactivity, this mere shadowing!" exclaimed the woman impatiently. "Dare anyone suggest another delay in moving, now that we have this letter for a model?"

"Jan is not yet here," said Max tentatively. "He is long gone and must have something important to report."

Madame Zagorsky snorted like a horse. "More likely something important to drink! One night yet I shall strangle Jan with my hands that have so often itched for the pleasure!"

"And yet," said Pelevin, "he is indispensable — with his knowledge of Hertzgotha and the court."

"And therefore yet lives," added the madam. She rose and paced the floor restlessly, the others meantime silent while they waited. There was nothing further to discuss as to formulated plans, so often had every detail been rehearsed. It was merely a matter now of choosing the hour for action.

For perhaps ten minutes the woman swung back and forth like a female leopard before her iron bars, while Max stared straight down at the floor and Pelevin made fantastic drawings on a blotting pad. At a distant

sound the madam suddenly halted and stood intently listening.

"At last!" she said, and a moment later, climbing two steps at a stride, a pale-faced, watery-eyed, well-dressed Hollander appeared where the door was held open for his entrance. It was Jan.

"I am sober!" he panted to the woman superior triumphantly. "I have a great piece of fortune — news! The Grand Duke is here! He has already seen the Princess. I have left him for hardly a minute since, and have observed him this morning when he departed from Wenck and made for himself new quarters!"

Even Madame Zagorsky was mute for a moment with astonishment and joy. She could scarcely believe she had heard the man aright. She had closed the door and stood regarding him with her penetrative stare as if his panting was some strange phenomenon.

"You are sure of what you say?" she asked at last. "The Grand Duke is here in New York?"

"Here! Who shall so well know him as myself?" said Jan. "I am sober. I have had nothing to eat, no drink, since seven o'clock last night. He is here!"

"The smile of fortune on our cause at last!" said the woman with fanatical zeal, as she made wild gestures with her hands. "We shall now get them both — both! It is worth all the waiting — everything! Perhaps we must wait a little longer now; but to get them both, ah! — a lifetime would be a little wait!" She turned on Jan almost savagely. "You left someone — who — to watch the Princess?"

"No one," Jan confessed, like a whipped cur. "It was more important to follow the Duke. You will say so yourself. Not until half an hour ago could I get



Larene and set her to shadow Karl-Wilhelm while I shall come. I have done my best."

"Where is he then, the Duke?"

Jan produced a dirty bit of paper and gave it into her hand. On it was written the name and street address of the hostelry to which the Duke had gone, together with the number of his room and the name under which he had registered.

"Max," commanded Madame Zagorsky, "go at once to the post on Fifth avenue. It is early. You may yet be in time to begin with the program of the idle rich."

"But the plans, the newer plans, now that the Duke is present," said Max. "Shall these not require us all?"

"They require none but myself," replied the woman. "You shall smell of their brewing in season."

Max went his way, and preparations for the brew began at the dingy old quarters, through the block from Wenck and Baron von Hochhaus.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### THE CAR OF FATES

NEW YORK has a record for sunny December afternoons; but none to excel the beauty of that particular one, deserving to be long remembered by many abroad in the park.

Stuyverant's car arrived in front of Alice Van Kirk's a little after two, Stuyverant sitting at his chauffeur's side while the man tooled the big shining car to a standstill at the curb.

"Meet me here to take it home at about four-thirty," Robley instructed. "Let the motor run."

The man alighted after his master, saluted, looked the purring mechanism over with a critical eye, and walked away. Stuyverant ran up the steps of the mansion; but did not enter, as Thurley met him at the door.

She was furred from boots to crown in the richest Russian sable, the garment a masterpiece of tailoring for grace and ease of movement. It seemed to Stuyverant he had never seen her wondrous brown eyes so softly beautiful, her brows so delicately arched, her color so brilliant and changeful. The smile on her curving lips was exquisitely lovely. She seemed the very embodiment of daintiness and strength together, a supple young goddess, chosen by beauty and magnetic energy to be their royal expression.

"You're really going to let me drive — you meant it?" she asked him delightedly. "I was so afraid you'd alter your mind after all!"

"Where you're concerned I haven't one to alter," he assured her smilingly, conveying a truth in a jest. "Haven't you noticed that before?"

"How could I notice the functions of your mind if it doesn't exist?" she replied to him archly. "And if what you say is true, it wouldn't be polite to observe it anyway."

He too smiled. "Polite or not, I trust you'll notice my happiness this afternoon and make up your mind it ought to be cultivated regularly."

They had come to the car, and she was stepping in to take the driver's seat. "Is your happiness such an anemic plant, or merely some sort of frail exotic?"

"Oh, it could stand its knocks," he responded cheerfully. "In fact, it does — constantly. But it thrives in sunshine, naturally."

She speeded up the motor and adjusted the speed controlling lever. "In which, of course, it is quite distinct from any other person's happiness," she answered with another of her smiles. "It's the only one of its kind."

"It's the only one I have," he said as she slipped in the clutch and the car began to move. "And you control the sun."

"Wouldn't it be horrid to be the Ice Trust?" she asked him, in mock gravity. "Think of the blighted little bits of happiness then! Where shall we go?"

"Let's follow the wand of pleasure."

"Oh, I very much prefer to follow the roads. Wherever you wander then, they lead you back again."

"Then choose the longest, the one that comes back by the devious windings of the proverbial 'shortest way home.' I don't believe I shall notice where we go."

I'm sure I sha'n't care, so long as the golden sunshine continues."

They were rolling down the avenue with others of their kind.

"You must be home the minute the sun goes down?"

"On the contrary, I'd go on like this forever."

"Oh, you'd tire of motoring finally — if motors became immortal. You'd ache for wings, or a little golden aeroplane with the harp strapped on behind."

"Suppose," he said, "you were the final arbiter, the goddess in control, and you knew I was aching for anything, would you really wish to be kind? What would you do for the ache?"

"Advise a mustard plaster," said Thurley, persistently unwilling to be anything but lightly responsive to his queries and his hints, "and a hot water bag if you felt a chill in your feet."

"Oh, Lord!" he groaned, "this isn't an auto, it's a hospital! Don't you know that doctors aren't human beings?"

"Neither is a final arbiter," she answered. "It sounds more like a brindle terrier. I shouldn't care to be one, please."

Down all the length of the avenue as far as the Plaza entrance to the park, where the gilded statue of Sherman, his horse, and the Goddess of Victory were glinting in the sun, she drove, pursued behind by one of the big green motor busses that buzzed like a giant insect. They were preceded also by carriages and cars in rapidly increasing numbers.

"A little of the park to begin with, anyway," she said, "and then perhaps out in the country. You'll

have to direct me as to roads as soon as we leave the crowd."

"The New York crowd is hard to leave," he told her sagely. "They invade all the country, and all abroad, and have their eyes on Mars. But I should say, around the park, then over to Riverside Drive, and the — the world is practically spread before us for exploration out beyond."

Thurley swung into the brilliant procession that flowed like a stream through the highways of New York's superb oasis, and a hundred necks were craned as car and carriage occupants turned to stare at the girl, like a figure of beauty at the wheel.

"It isn't much like our first little trip together," Stuyverant continued presently. "I don't suppose we'll ever be able to duplicate the excitements and — all the rest — of that."

"Would you like to try it with your second wrist?" she inquired. "Don't you think you're sufficiently interesting as you are?"

"I shall soon have this one out of the hospital," he answered, "when I hope for the pleasure of doing my share of the work."

Such energizing elixir was in the air as made the speed and distance restrictions of the park a species of aggravation. Eagerly Thurley gazed out ahead, her faculties largely centered on the guidance of the car. She had neither time nor self consciousness to be aware of the scores of curious and admiring beings who passed them and forgot all else in watching her animated beauty.

Here and there a carriage or an auto glided by with acquaintances recently encountered. Some Thurley saw and acknowledged with a smile, others were wholly

unobserved in her preoccupation with driving. Fiaschi was one of those who passed, staring and grimacing actively, only to be lost a moment later without having drawn so much as a glance. He was storming inwardly with rage at Stuyverant, an impotent emotion that heightened his own desire.

Thurley began her deviations from Robley's program as soon as a change was practicable. She guided the car from the western exit of the park at its northern end, in sight of the giant bones and skeleton of the great Cathedral of Saint John the Divine, drove straight up past the mighty structure, then over to the river and the drive, presently passing the tomb of Grant and continuing on to the huge steel viaduct that spans a great Harlem ravine.

"What shall we achieve if we keep this direction long enough?" she finally asked of her companion. "Is this the road to Boston?"

"Yonkers," said Stuyverant; "Albany finally, if we keep on straight, and Buffalo afterward, or anything you like. Sleepy Hollow is out in this direction, after Yonkers."

"You couldn't promise me a sight of dear old Rip Van Winkle, out in the Emersonian glades?"

"I can show you Poe's cottage in the Bronx," he answered smilingly. "There's the picture of the crow on the gable."

"The raven!" she declared.

"No, it's a crow," he persisted, "the sort one doesn't hanker after at that. Shall I show you the road and let you see?"

"Let's just ride," she said, and some way it gladdened his heart, just the friendly, comrade way she said it, smiling in his eyes.

They rode toward Yonkers, out along the last encroachments of the monster city, with its blocks of houses tramping down the grass, and the trees and even the rocks of the once-green Manhattan Island, beneath the far part of the subway railroad structure, here built like the older fashioned elevated road, and finally over the bridge that spans the Harlem River, isolating New York from the mainland of the long and slender peninsula; and so ran on through Van Cortlandt Park, where golfers were straying on the green.

They turned to the right, at Stuyverant's direction, after coming to hill-built Yonkers town, and roved through open stretches of country, where, with grass still green and trees all stark, there was merely a ghostly suggestion of the recent autumnal beauty.

Far over to the eastward they encountered the old-time Boston road, where the post chaise once made its lumbering way from the Dutch of New Amsterdam to the Pilgrims of New England. Out here, on the borders of Pelham Bay, there were cars in unexpected numbers, endlessly humming up and down the splendid thoroughfares in idle pursuit of pleasure.

The sun was inclining westward when at length they turned to head for the town and home. Down through the long straight stretch of Jerome Avenue they came upon cars in all manner of haste and color, some of them crowded, others occupied by a single being only, and the vast majority, like themselves, bound homeward to escape the chill already suggested in the air.

Thurley had pushed her throttle up a notch and advanced the spark sufficiently to accelerate their speed to a pace only just within the limit of the law. Then she and Stuyverant were startled by a strange

piercing cry of warning from the rear, just as their car shot in upon a mile or more of narrowed road, where excavations and upthrown earth occupied half of the highway's ordinary width.

Stuyverant turned — and Thurley saw the blanching of his face, even before she could take the part of a second necessary to cast one look behind.

A rare and horrifying thing had happened. A car built for racing, with three helpless children sitting in the rear, was plunging down the crowded road with all the madness of a runaway locomotive — its driver suddenly stricken with death at the wheel!

One of his hands still lingered on the throttle and spark, which a jolt, as he died, had thrown forward. The other hand had fallen at his side. He sat in apoplectic rigidity, his glassy eyes staring unseeingly before him, his attitude that of some grim Nemesis, severe as stone, pursuing his living fellow beings as if for company on the long, dark avenue into the great Unknown. He was going like the wind.

Nearly a dozen cars had shot, veered, and skidded from his path before the warning cry had come so far as Thurley's ears. The children that rode with the grim chauffeur were screaming in agonized horror. Women's shrill trebles pierced the air, above the hoarser shouting of men.

By a series of things mysterious and not to be expected, the death driven car did not swerve madly from the beaten track and crash into trees at the side of the road, or into the equally fatal and thickly planted iron trolley posts, lined down through the center of the highway. It came on, rocking and swaying drunkenly, like a thing of life, diabolically intent upon destruction.



The horror of the spectators, who felt, rather than saw, that the driver was a corpse, had been centered on fear for the children, thrown about in the tonneau in sickening violence. A few had feared for themselves, before they could dart from the monster's path and feel it rocket by.

Now, of a sudden, the alarm increased. Not only were the children in danger of instant death, through collision with any of the numerous obstacles along the path, but everyone chasing in wild pursuit became aware of the car ahead — the car with Thurley and Stuyverant, hedged in the narrower, earth banked road and unable to dodge to the side.

"We're in for it now!" said Robley quietly. "You'll have to race to escape it."

Thurley glanced behind again, and then at the road ahead.

"We can't pick up the speed," she said, calmly enough, making every possible move to give her more power. "And some trolley cars are blocking ahead, and a danger flag or something in the way."

"Good God! Those children!" muttered Stuyverant. "It's they or us — or maybe both, in spite of all we can do!"

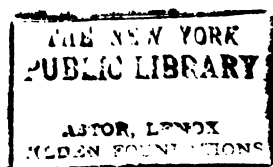
He expected that he and Thurley would be saved, not by their possible speed ahead, but rather by some frightful plunge the comet behind must presently make, with no sentient control of the wheel. But, still by that singular perversity of inanimate things, the runaway mechanism clung to the road as if some unseen, ghostly hand was laid to guide it to a deadly course and reap a greater harvest.

"Gaining!" Stuyverant cried in helpless horror,



*"I am going to let it strike," she cried.*

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while Thurley, bending every energy to urge the car faster and faster, abruptly saw a mass of rock and earth débris piled from a broken water main across her only course. They shot past the first of the trolley cars, stalled on their tracks, and were in a *cul de sac*.

Passengers, conductor, and motorman shrieked as they saw the impending doom, where the dead man's chariot held lurchingly, almost malignantly to the road and crept upon the rear of Robley's car.

Stuyverant was kneeling in his seat, helplessly transfixed by the awful stare of the dead man's face, now a few rods only away. He had never seen anything more frightful, more repellent, in his life. A fearful intensity had set its mark on the mask of death, till the face bore a look of murderous hate which chilled the blood in Robley's veins.

Thurley stood up, or half stood up, by the wheel. "I am going to let it strike!" she cried. "It's the only way!"

She meant the racer was bound to overtake them despite her utmost efforts. Disaster blocked the road ahead. The machine behind had gone amuck — and Death was at the helm.

She dared not slack to receive the blow. Her only hope was to hold her speed and so accept the impact with as small a jar as such momentum would allow.

She was glancing alternately out ahead to steer, and behind to receive the plunging comet of steel and force so madly hurtling upon them, her face as gray as stone.

Inch by inch the fire belching engine of doom was creeping up, in their dust. It struck a lump of something in the road, lurching horribly over, struck an-

other that instantly righted the forward wheels, and leaped onward as if angered by delay.

Forward, backward, Thurley's glance was flung, and then, with a sudden twisting of the wheel, she swerved aside for the breadth of a hand — and the monster behind rammed viciously up against her car, its headlamps shattered with a crash of glass and metal, its two front wheels, as it were, closely sandwiched with the rear ones of the Stuyverant machine, while its radiator crumpled on the springs and tonneau of the flying obstacle encountered.

There was one huge jolt which sat Thurley down, but her hands were still glued to the wheel. She kicked off her clutch and lightly applied her brake. Her own motor, disconnected from the driving gear, raced in the wildest uproar.

She held to the road, thrusting harder on the brake, till presently, driven only by the madly ramming machine behind, she was halting the interlocked cars. The weight of her own big tourer was slowing the racer at the rear to impotent snarling and inertia, when Stuyverant clambered heedlessly over tonneau and all, leaped to the car where the dead man sat, and stilled the laboring motor.

Ahead they had barely another hundred yards of road sufficiently open for the race.

Thurley sank limberly into her seat, as weak and white as a towel. Yet she faintly smiled as Stuyverant cast her a look from his place where the children were safe.

She had performed a masterpiece of receiving and cushioning a collision which something akin to a miracle had cheated of its prey!

## CHAPTER XXIX

BARON HOCHHAUS

How long they had been delayed by the avoided collision, the ensuing excitement, and the forcing apart of the cars, Thurley could never have told. It seemed to her another afternoon, a long way removed from the earlier hours, when at length she and Robley were once more gliding down the road with the lowered sun redly blazing upon them.

She was driving automatically, reactionary steadiness having succeeded her nerve collapse. She was still a trifle pale; but had pulled herself together with amazing promptness, after the ordeal was over, and had stoutly refused the services of a dozen chauffeurs that Stuyverant was ready to engage.

They had not resumed their former gayety of conversation. Indeed, they had scarcely spoken at all for the fifteen minutes elapsed since once more getting under way. They came to the great iron drawbridge over another winding of the Harlem River, where railroad structures, shipping, trolley confusion, and a mighty exemplification of the city's activities abruptly blotted out all but memory of the quiet glades behind.

"We seem fated for excitements," said Stuyverant at last, "especially with this car. I wonder what the third will be — and when?"

Thurley glanced at him with one of her fainter smiles. "You believe in threes — you're superstitious?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. Everyone has a few superstitions, I presume. There does seem to be a sort of fatality in trios. We may not get our third experience, of course; but then —"

"Why ride in this old car any more?" Thurley interrupted, half in earnest. "I don't believe I shall."

"If it's fated, you will, you can't escape it," he assured her, laughingly, yet a little serious nevertheless. "We are mere helpless puppets of our destiny, and it works both ways. If we can't escape our cataracts of disaster, neither can we sidestep our zephyrs of joy."

Thurley looked grave. "I think I prefer cataracts of joy and zephyrs of disaster."

"May they come that way!" he said devoutly. "I would order them so if I could."

"It looked like a whirlwind of death awhile ago," she said after a moment of silence. "Please, if you must have a third of our experiences, begin to tame it down right away."

There was no particular pleasure in threading the up town streets of Gotham, as Thurley presently discovered. By Stuyverant's directions she wound across and down strange thoroughfares with all her ordinary skill, however, till at length they rolled through Lenox Avenue, and so once more to Central Park for the final charm of their journey.

The last of the orange sunshine was casting a ruddy glow of day-end splendor on the trees and lawns of the still populous roadways, as they joined the homeward roving procession of motors and open carriages.

Thurley, intent as before on the guidance and control of the car, where a moment's reckless driving might

precipitate some huge disaster, had barely taken time to enjoy a glance at the sun's soft glory and the cheering ruby background for the trees. She did not note the rapid approach of a carriage wherein two men were riding and inspecting all the crowds.

Stuyverant beheld the conveyance, or rather felt his glance attracted to one of the men on its cushions. The man was stiff in his poise and leaning angularly forward in his seat, as he stared with concentrated intensity at the girl driving the car.

It was Baron von Hochhaus, Ambassador Extraordinary from Hertzegotha, and Wenck was at his side. In a vain, rapid search for the missing Grand Duke they had finally adopted this expedient, trusting that they might, perchance, discover him riding in the park.

The little man, more iron visaged than before, with this vision of Thurley to set the lines of his countenance, saw nothing of Stuyverant, or at most had given him a glance. But Robley returned his intensified stare, instantly puzzled to know where it was he had seen this face before.

The exchange of scrutinies lasted but a moment, when the auto and the carriage, shuffled into the moving pack of life, and parted by the ceaseless maneuvers of the traffic and the Fates, continued each its own way. The Baron turned galvanically, as one on a pivot, in his seat, and Stuyverant craned his neck to the limit — and the incident was closed.

"Did you see him — see that man?" said Robley, wheeling at once to the girl. "He stared at you as if he had seen a spirit."

"What man?" said Thurley. "I didn't notice anyone at all."



"Who in the deuce—I've seen him before; but where?" continued Stuyverant. "He's someone in particular—I wish I could think—I know I know him well; but where—or how—"

"New York has a large staring population," Thurley ventured. "Perhaps he's just the star starrer, or star gazer if you prefer, of the town."

Stuyverant smiled; but his thoughts were far afield. "It always worries me to forget a thing I ought to remember. It seems to me he did me a favor sometime. It couldn't have been at Newport, or here in New York—Hum! doesn't a thing like that get on a fellow's mind and stick like a ghost?"

Thurley saw no necessity of taking the matter so seriously. "Are ghosts really known to be sticky?"

"Ah! I remember. Of course!" He suddenly turned to the girl, a new sort of gravity depicted on his face. "If you had only seen him!" he added. "No wonder he stared—I mean—he was Baron von Hochhaus of Hertzegotha, one of the biggest men in the Kingdom."

For a moment Thurley met his gaze blankly, till of a sudden the full significance of this intelligence, in the light of what Robley believed of herself, burst in upon her swiftly moving thoughts. She colored instantly, visions of the Grand Duke Karl and a hundred kindred incidents and lucubrations crowding thickly upon her. "The Baron—" she started.

Stuyverant, noting her confusion, was instantly contrite. "I beg your pardon—I hardly stopped to think. The abruptness of the meeting—my memory—I hope I have not distressed you unintentionally."

"It is not worth mentioning," Thurley murmured,

still somewhat nonplussed, nevertheless, and wondering what, if anything, the visit of another dignitary from Hertzegotha might imply, and how much his presence in Gotham might affect herself and Alice. "You met him on the Continent? You have been to Hertzegotha?"

"At Berlin. I have never been to your—to his country; but hope— He did me a very great service two years ago, and was good enough to say I had done him a greater. We became very friendly. I liked him through and through."

Thurley was silent for a moment. When she spoke her companion was aware that the subject was dismissed. "I believe I shall not drive all the way down through the park," she said. "I begin to feel a little recurrence of—something from what we went through."

Stuyverant having hoped all afternoon for one of the little familiar exchanges of a word or a glance between herself and him, something that would hark back to their initial meeting, perhaps, or to some of the few sweet occasions since, was loath to realize that their day was at an end, with nothing said between them to arouse his oscillating hopes.

"It's a pity the sun must sink, a day like this," he said. "I wish it might reverse its motion and begin things all over again."

"Oh, no!" she expostulated warmly. "It has been far too strenuous for me! I'd rather start a new one, please, and leave a few things out!"

"But not our ride—and sense of comradeship?"

She looked at him quietly, softly, despite her sense of judgment. "It has been like that, hasn't it? I mean— Shall I drive you home again?"

It was just a flash of that wondrous afternoon, when joy had eased his pain. His heart bounded lightly at her look and smile and the shadowy presence of her softer mood, before it was merged in something else, elusive and evanescent. "My man will drive me home," he said. "Would you wish to have him take you away again — and leave you somewhere in the park?"

"I enjoyed that visit to the park," she answered, and speeding up the car she drove it down the avenue, to which they had emerged, and was presently halting by the curb before the Van Kirk abode.

He assisted her out — and thrilled at the clasp of her little hand for a moment intrusted to his own. For a second he held her gaze. ‡

"Shall I see you again, Miss Thurley — soon?"

She arched her brows in her quaintly piquant way. "I hardly expect to vanish, or to become invisible. Good-by until we meet again. I've enjoyed it — nearly all."

She ran up the steps and waved him adieu, and her smile made his heart rejoice.

Then presently he was gone, with his waiting chauffeur, and Thurley, encountering Alice on the stairs, paused halfway up, as if the weight of her news could be carried no farther that day.

"More startling things for you to hear," she said. "Who do you think we just passed in the park?"

"I know," said Alice, instantly mimicking soldierly rigidity, "Baron von Hochhaus — all sorts of things — from Hertzegotha. Am I right?"

"Good gracious!" said Thurley, once more a trifle pale from overtaxations of the hour. "But how —"

"He has already been here this afternoon. He is

coming again at eight o'clock and has asked to see you alone." 2

Thurley sat down on the stairs. "Aren't they getting thick?" she said, faintly smiling up at Alice. "But what's the use of worrying? Mr. Stuyverant and I were nearly killed by a runaway automobile."

It was Alice's turn to feel a wilting of the heart. She too sat down on the stairs. "Thurley! You're pale, child. Tell me all about it."

"It didn't last long — thank the stars!" imparted Thurley, and, reducing the story to the minimum of facts and horrors, she related what had occurred. "It happened to end all right," she continued presently; "but it made me a little weak. The other car was damaged pretty badly; but we were barely scratched. Of course there were plenty of people to take the children home — and the awful dead — thing — away."

"Made you a little weak!" repeated Alice. "Good Heavens! Robley couldn't have driven you home. Who did?"

"Oh, there was no good reason for hiring a man," said Thurley, simply. "I was soon all right again."

"You drove the car — after that?"

"Why, of course."

Alice swallowed hard at her emotions. "I think you are safe enough to meet the Baron alone." But she put out her arms, slid down a step, and strained Thurley tightly against her bosom. "You frighten me, dear," she added maternally. "I somehow feel I'd rather you wouldn't ride with Robley again. There's a hoodoo on his car."

Thurley laughed, in sheer relief from overstrain of strength and nerves. "Robley said something like

that himself; but I almost love that car. He said we'd have to look out for the third time and its charm."

"Dear girl," Alice added in her tender mood. "I have launched you in violent waters, apparently."

"Mostly Florida waters," Thurley laughed. "I'm the luckiest girl in the world — after all."

Alice kissed her, rose, assisted Thurley to her feet, and with one arm snugly about the slender waist went with her up the stairs.

## CHAPTER XXX

### A PLENIPOTENTIARY BEGS

FOR the third time Thurley faced a species of dread behind the reception room door. The Baron was there, alone.

"He's as little as a Christmas tree candle," Alice assured her, smoothing the girl's wondrous golden hair by way of allaying her nervous apprehensions. "You needn't be afraid of handling him just as you wish. You could blow him out with a whiff."

"If you could only help me a little," Thurley said, her smile rather faint and forced. "You would know in a moment whether I'd better tell him or not that I'm sorry I — just look so like the Princess."

Alice patted her affectionately on the cheek. "If a girl who did what you did to-day cannot trust to the guidance of her instincts and judgment, she ought to be abandoned to her fate. That's all. You'll know what to say and do. And, whatever you decide, be sure, my dear, I'll accept it and be content. Now go along. I'll finish reading of your heroic conduct in *The Evening Star*.

"It isn't half true, not half of all that stuff!" said Thurley, reddening guiltily at thought of the lurid account already in the New York press concerning the collision on the road. "I don't see where they ever got so much."

"Go along," said Alice, "and remember, this little

clothespin of a Baron is not a sixty horsepower automobile."

One of the servants opened the door to the room where the Baron was in waiting. Thurley entered in girlish trepidation, instantly convinced that the Baron was eight feet tall and a hundred and fifty horsepower at the least.

The man was little only in his stature. His genuine size could not have been concealed or calculated. He was standing in the center of the room when Thurley entered, his hands behind his back. He had halted from pacing up and down at the slight sound at the door. He came half the distance forward, regarding Thurley piercingly, as she, half dazed and wholly fascinated by his personality, — filling all the room, — gazed fixedly upon him while advancing.

"Miss Thurley, I believe?" he said in German, the iron of his face relaxing in a mobile way as he discerned and comprehended her timidity of spirit. "May I hope I am welcome in your home?"

"Oh, very welcome," Thurley said impulsively, transformed at once to her frank and easy self by something cordial in his manner, and she held forth her hand in token of sincerity.

With an older, more finished grace than that of the Duke he took it and raised it to his lips. "I honor myself in the privilege of coming," he assured her, looking her once more squarely in the eyes. "You were a little prepared for my visit?"

"I have been prepared for almost anything recently," Thurley blurted honestly. "I mean — of course Mrs. Van Kirk informed me when I returned this afternoon."

"So. Will you not be more comfortable seated?"

Thurley inclined her head. "And you will also be comfortable?"

He drew up a chair as she sank on a slender bit of Chippendale, and then sat only on its edge, with a certain military alertness, as if expectant of the bugle's call and a hastening into action. "You are perhaps a little aware of my mission here in America," he said, with no further preliminaries by way of introducing his subject. "You know I have come as an extraordinary representative of the court at Hertzegotha?"

"Yes," answered Thurley a little faintly. "I knew — something of your dignity — your mission — of course. Mrs. Van Kirk informed me."

"You know that the Kingdom of Hertzegotha is very much distressed, almost disrupted, by the unprecedented disappearance and absence from the court of Princess Thirvinia and Grand Duke Karl-Wilhelm?"

Thurley wondered whither his line of queries might be trending, but she saw no course but to answer straightforwardly. There was no sign as yet to guide her along a special path. "I could scarcely be in ignorance of what you have stated — of some of it, I mean."

"But you may not know the gravity, the acute anxiety, of the situation," he told her quietly. "I wish in particular to impress upon you the fact that Hertzegotha is appalled, is politically stricken to its uttermost foundation, by this calamity; that disaster stares her in the face, absorption, disintegration, I might say degradation and ruin, if her Princess and the Duke are not restored to their Kingdom. I wish to arouse your profoundest sympathy with these facts,



and to play upon every noble attribute of your nature thereby."

He spoke with a feeling even deeper than that betrayed by Wenck in this very room, as the former representative pleaded with her to return to Hertzegotha. Wenck had obviously believed herself to be the Princess. It did not seem credible for half a moment that Baron von Hochhaus could be similarly deluded. And yet she could not, from his impassioned speech, extract the slightest clue to his mind.

She was much affected. Her sympathies were thoroughly aroused. She hardly knew what she must answer. She was almost on the point of revealing, then and there, her entirely American identity and helplessness in Hertzegotha's situation!

"You — you certainly do arouse — you make me wish to help you all I can," she said. "I only wish —"

"You can help me greatly — here — to-night!" he interrupted eagerly, the predicament of his country having wrought a miracle of transformation in the man to make him thoroughly human. "I was certain of the goodness of your heart!"

Thurley flushed. "Thank you; but I'm afraid you may not —"

"First let me ask you — you have seen the Duke, here last night?"

"Yes, Mrs. Van Kirk and myself."

"Could you possibly tell me what he did, how he acted when he saw you, what he said?"

"Why — he acted like anybody else."

"He was pleased, surprised?"

Thurley's color mounted readily to her throat and cheeks. "He said he was pleased — I think. He

seemed to be glad — I mean — it is very hard for any young woman to claim — to boast — to make a statement about anything like that."

"Naturally," agreed the Baron; "but he kissed your hand, he kept his eyes upon you, he enacted the rôle — pardon the query — of the accepted fiancé?"

Thurley's color became fairly scarlet. "Why — I — I hardly know what anyone else might think. His eyes were very bright. I couldn't help noticing that."

"They were upon you rather constantly?"

She nodded. "But he was here a short time only."

"Yet he was not sad?"

"He said he was not — in the least."

"Ah, perhaps he said he was happy?" The Baron's anxiety in the inquisition increased.

"Most any man feels obliged to say as much as that," was Thurley's naïve reply.

"Could you possibly repeat exactly what he said in that regard?"

"Why — he really made his remark to Mrs. Van Kirk. He told her that when he arrived at noon he hated New York and that night he loved all America."

"Ah!" The Baron slid back in his chair, his look of anxiety growing more pronounced. "I had a fear — I had a fear of this."

Thurley was intensely sympathetic. "You fear he will not return?"

"Tell me," he answered, his face slightly twitching as he spoke, "did he express the slightest desire that you — go with him to Hertzegotha?"

Thurley was certain the game, begun in innocence, was going much too far. She felt that to meddle in affairs of state, where a Kingdom's agony was vividly re-

vealed, was not to be warranted another moment for anything she and Alice might desire.

"The Duke suggested something like — he seemed to think," she faltered, observing distress more and more plainly inscribed on the Baron's lineaments. "Oh, I think I ought to tell you, Baron von Hochhaus that —"

A startlingly loud and imperious knock on the door interrupted her speech and startled Thurley to her feet. The Baron too had risen instantly, his face once more an iron mask as he faced about to the door, which had opened from without.

Wenck shot in with a military galvanism, accelerated by some worry almost foaming in his eyes. He was fearfully congested with something new that the Baron must instantly hear.

The Baron, for his part, divining that something untoward had occurred, was keyed to a high celerity of speech. "Pardon," he said to Thurley jerkily. "May I crave your permission for a moment apart with Herr Wenck?"

"Certainly," Thurley answered, herself wide eyed with wonder at it all, and she went to the farther end of the room while Wenck continued, from his place by the door, to bow and redden in her presence.

The Baron was at his side at once. "What is it?" he demanded. "Find your voice! No new ill tidings of the Duke?"

"Ill tidings for them both!" almost wailed poor Wenck, his utterance a rasping whisper for only the Baron to hear. "Zagorsky with all her brood — Pelevin, Jan, and others — is here in New York, their agent already shadowing her Highness, and doubtless

his Excellency, night and day. You must make them to flee, or all for the Kingdom is lost!"

"Zagorsky? I feared it," said the Baron, instantly calm, now that the worst was thus baldly presented. "We could find no trace of the woman or her usual associates after the Princess had gone. Have you further news of the Duke?"

"None — none; but this has overwhelmed me. Our customary safeguards are impossible here; the chances for violence are many. Unless you can now persuade the Princess —"

"There is hope," said the Baron, interrupting, another change abruptly coming on his face as he cast a quick glance in Thurley's direction. "No sacrifice now could be too great to retrieve this runaway pair. Leave me now and wait, to go in half an hour."

Wenck hesitated. "But is there nothing I may do, no assistance I may render? I must only wait?"

"You will thereby serve. Then go."

"For God and Hertzegotha!" said Wenck, his face betraying his emotions, and saluting he bowed himself backward from the room.

The Baron returned to his former position, and Thurley glided up from the farther window, thoroughly determined on the course she felt to be imperative.

"Baron von Hochhaus," she said at once, resuming precisely where she had been interrupted, "do you not discern that I am not Princess Thirvinia? If you do not, I must tell you so, and tell you how weak I am to help you. Perhaps I resemble your Princess. It would seem I must; for all New York, and even Herr Wenck, have thrust this new identity upon me. Neither I nor Mrs. Van Kirk ever started this absurd mistake. If

we have a little permitted others to delude themselves, it seemed an innocent diversion; but with all this serious entanglement, this menace to your country, I cannot consent to another moment of this grave misunderstanding!"

The Baron was watching her face with penetrative, keen discernment of the character that lay behind her looks and words. He had shown not the slightest sign of surprise, nor the change of a muscle in his face. "Thank you, Miss Thurley, for your candor, your spirit," he said to her quietly. "I knew at once that you were not the Princess. You will pardon a gray old man, I am sure, for saying you are, perhaps, more beautiful, even more endowed with charm. It was because I knew you were not her Royal Highness that I ventured to hope for your assistance."

Thurley felt her tension instantly released. "Oh, I'm glad you know. I have been so puzzled. I have felt so guilty. I have hardly known what I ought to do, in such a situation; but as long as it seemed a harmless joke, it was fun, a temptation, to let it go on."

"Your position requires no explanation," he assured her. "I understand it perfectly. I am certain, moreover, of your sympathy, as well as your honest intent. I am here to implore your aid."

His gesture and the tone of his voice in that final sentence went straight to Thurley's heart, she knew not why. "I can help you? But how? What is it I could do?"

"Much, perhaps very much indeed." His gravity was obvious. "First let me ask you, Did the Duke request that he might return again?"

"Yes, certainly. You see, I couldn't understand

whether he had been engaged to the Princess without ever having seen her first, — as they sometimes do, I'm told, — or whether he really thought — ”

“Exactly,” the Baron interrupted, in his quiet way that masked a certain eagerness to proceed with the matter in hand, “I appreciate all of that also. Did you tell him he might return?”

“There seemed to be nothing else to do. I hardly knew how to refuse.”

“You had no personal feeling, no suddenly ignited feeling — toward — in the interview, its outcome, his evident pleasure at the meeting, his desire to renew his addresses?”

“Why, he was nice — very interesting. It was flattering, I suppose,” Thurley faltered, rosy of face again. “I hardly had time to think except that he was handsome — and pleasant — and a Duke.”

The Baron motioned her once more to her seat, then occupied his chair-edge as soon as she was settled. He altered his course to secure the information for which he was delicately feeling, his desire to know how much or how little Thurley might have fallen love's victim to the looks and titles of her recent suitor.

“To-day I saw you riding in the park with a Mr. Stuyverant,” he said. “Once I knew him well. I regard him as an exceptionally able and splendid young man.”

“Oh,” said Thurley, surprised at his swift abandonment of the former subject. “He said he saw you, at the time, and mentioned meeting you once in Berlin.”

The Baron nodded. “Do you feel a particular interest in Mr. Stuyverant? Pardon the question of an

old man greatly concerned in everything at present pertaining to yourself. You doubtless have many admirers; but perhaps there is one — ” He left his sentence incomplete.

Thurley had reddened as before. “Would it help in your dilemma to probe — to know — Won’t you please tell me just exactly how I may be of assistance?”

“I will be very frank,” he answered, becoming aware that the open way was Thurley’s way and candor the most expedient. “If the young Duke should fancy himself in love, if it should be no fancy, what would you say to his addresses, what would you do?”

Thurley laughed. “Oh, he couldn’t do anything of the sort, unless he thinks — Why, he’s only a boy! He’s not an American. I should feel very sorry if it went so far, and I’m sure it never will.”

“Ah!” exclaimed the Baron. “I felt certain of your aid. Is it possible now to tell me when he will come?”

“I have no means of knowing that myself.”

The Baron rose and paced about a little uneasily. “Of course. But come he will, and we shall learn — I arrive now at the point, Miss Thurley. I shall make a very important request.”

Thurley met his gaze unflinchingly. “Yes? It is something about the Duke?”

“That part presently. It is, first, that you continue as before to enact the rôle of Princess Thirvinia; that is to say, that you do nothing, state nothing, confess nothing, that will in any manner disabuse the minds of those who now credit the story that you are her Royal Highness.”

Thurley almost gasped. She had been prepared to

abandon everything in any public manner the Baron might have desired. She had thought no other course tenable after to-night. She had even feared the imposition of which she and Alice had been passively guilty had wrought great harm to Hertzegotha, possibly, and constituted a grave peril to its Princess.

"Go on with — this pretense?" she said. "You wish that, wish me to occupy the place? Do you mean to everyone?"

"To everyone."

"Not confess to the Duke when he comes?"

"Even that would be quite unnecessary."

"But why continue the fiction, after this?" she inquired wonderingly. "Can it do any possible good, be of any benefit or service?"

"Perhaps a very great service indeed," he assured her earnestly. "I am not at liberty to explain, except to say you are already accepted, almost officially, as Princess Thirvinia, and that Hertzegotha may be immeasurably served and indebted if you will kindly consent to proceed as before, disturb no beliefs already excited as to who and what you are. This you will promise to do?"

Thurley smiled at him girlishly. "Of course I've enjoyed it — any young woman would. If you knew how novel, how wonderful, it has been to me! I have done almost nothing to bring it about. I admit I'd feel a little regret to — well, be stripped of all of it so suddenly; but I made up my mind to do anything to help Hertzegotha, for all her troubles are real and serious, and mine — are all pretense."

"Not all pretense," he corrected kindly. "They are just as real, just as poignant, as those of a King-



dom. But may they be fewer and briefer!" He held forth his hand, took Thurley's in his firm, dry clasp, and raised it as before to his lips. "You deserve your throne and coronet," he added. "I trust they will one day come."

"Thank you," said Thurley; "but I feel as if I'm being absurdly overpaid for having a very happy time." Her smile went straight to his heart.

He knew of the dangers besetting the unsuspecting girl, and felt a momentary pang at the element of heartlessness he was practising in shielding the genuine Princess, and perhaps Hertzegotha's integrity, behind this innocent instrument of the Fates. Then the overwhelming gravity of the situation and his own relentless and absorbing patriotism — for which he would have sacrificed a score of lives, his own included — this steadied him back upon his course like an iron device on its rails.

"I could wish your happiness an absolute triumph, always," he assured her sincerely. "Be sure that every possible exertion will be made, so far as I and my associates are concerned, to secure that end. I have your agreement to continue as you were — the reputed Princess Thirvinia?"

"If you wish it, with all my heart."

"To everyone, no matter what may occur?"

"Of course. It could be no other way."

He kissed her hand again. "*Auf wiedersehen*," he said, and she presently heard the hall door close when he and Wenck had gone.

## CHAPTER XXXI

### THE CALDRON BUBBLES

GAILLARD came into his office a trifle pale and more than a trifle agitated. The news received at his bank had been staggering, yet had served to arouse a rage in his breast that stiffened all the sinews of his being. The first intimation of Fiaschi's double dealing had come thus belated to his ken. He found himself practically undermined before his least suspicion had been aroused.

His secretary glanced up at him instinctively, wondering if the warning note received that morning from the bank had been confirmed. He saw that it had.

Gaillard threw down a bundle of papers and leaned on the desk. "I might have known better than to deal with a dago Count," he said. "They are born to fatten on the world at large, and the U. S. in particular. Has the list improved since noon?"

The secretary rose and went to the ticker, where the white paper tape was coiled yards long in a basket. "It was going off when I looked at it last," he imparted, scanning the figures printed on the narrow strip of ribbon. "Still dragging a little heavily."

"I'd expect that as part of the luck," said Gaillard, seating himself beside the desk and idly strumming with his fingers. "It's something, I suppose, to have found out as soon as this what my olive oil associate is doing. I'll put a crimp in him for this that the devil himself couldn't iron out!"

"I hope you will, sir!" exclaimed his secretary ear-

nestly. "I've felt all along that you were trusting the Count too far, putting too much of the management in his hands."

Gaillard scowled. "Without him and his uncle's connections in Paris we couldn't have put a finger in the pie."

"Quite right, sir; but hasn't he got you to put in more than a finger — I mean in the past few days?"

"That's the joker," Gaillard admitted. "My share before was comparatively small — all he would let me have. Now I've got an arm in the pie, and maybe part of my shoulder. He must have held me off before to make me eager, and now he has let me in up to the hilt — for this!"

"But about your notes, sir?" said the eager assistant, returning from the ever busy ticker that was blithesomely tapping out fortune or ruin on the tape. "They have not yet fallen into his hands?"

"That's the one uncertainty. I shall not be able to determine where they are for several days. Tyson has let them go — the ingrate! If Fiaschi gets them at all it will be in a roundabout manner. I doubt if he'll take them personally. He'd prefer to have someone else put on the screws."

"But you'll beat him, of course, at the final moment?"

"To a pulp!" said Gaillard, rising and striking the desk with his fist. "I'd rather go stone broke and get out in the street to dig sewers than have him down me now! The treacherous hound!"

"Perhaps," said the secretary timidly, "you might be wiser to let me sell your curb securities while the loss is reasonably small."

"Not a share!" Gaillard told him decisively. "I've taken losses enough! This is merely a dip in the market. That's well known everywhere. I shall need some profits on that Q. & P. to fight this business through. And Metal Reductions is due for a rise on the dividend payable this week. I'll take a profit on them both."

He went to his inner office restlessly, closed the door behind him, and began to pace the floor. His thoughts had gone straight to Thurley and Fiaschi's aspirations for her hand. He was instantly hot all through, recalling a scene of the "Princess" and the Count together at Alice Van Kirk's. He had likewise read of her adventure with Stuyverant's car — and this had increased his impatience.

He thought of his letter, written and sent to Thurley after their drive in the park. There had been no answer. He turned to a heap of mail that was neatly piled on his desk and pawed it over rapidly, in a search that availed him not at all.

Again he paced the room. That Fiaschi had mixed their business with affairs concerning Thurley, with purpose to eliminate himself, had not yet occurred to his mind. But now that the die was cast by the Count the plan to beat him thoroughly in their financial deal and so perhaps forcibly eject him from Thurley's circle, was royally welcome to his mind. He paced for an hour, working out his plans, then started for Alice Van Kirk's.

He encountered Fiaschi outside the office door, the Count having just arrived for a moment's conversation.

"Ah, so very early you depart your business place?" said he. "It is not impossible, a trifling conference?"

"I'm rather in a hurry," Gaillard answered. "Anything new? Perhaps you can tell me here."

"Very good. The building is your office, eh?" and Fiaschi shrugged resignedly. "I have only to inform you this option which we hold, it is demanded we shall cable the money not later than the seventeenth, and this is important you shall know."

Gaillard colored wrathfully. "But you said the end of the month!"

"Ah, yes, this was my wish, my hope; but I also am helpless. This is the cable from Paris." He produced the cable in question and Gaillard read it with a blur of red before his eyes. He felt convinced that his friend the Count had requested this demand for no other purpose than that of destroying all possible chance for him (Gaillard) to meet his obligations. He saw more than the words upon the yellow slip, he saw ruin smoking about him, and his structures prone on the ground.

Yet one gleam of hope still shone through it all, and with characteristic American stoicism he accepted the outlook with scarcely a sign that Fiaschi could have enjoyed.

"All right," he answered carelessly, handing back the message. "Is that all you can think of to-day?"

"It is enough for me," replied the Count, mirthlessly smiling. "I shall be obliged to call upon all my resource, everything. Yourself — ah! you Americans have such untold moneys! Sell, I have no more intelligence. I must also go."

His gentle hint that Gaillard must command a very large sum of money within a week to meet his obligations or be wrecked, was not at all lost on his business

associate, who felt the barb of the Count's little shaft diffusing poison through his system.

They went to the elevator together, parting below in the hallway of marble that led to the Broadway entrance. Each was anxious to escape the other, and both took cabs a block apart and started a race up town to the Van Kirk mansion.

They were doomed to double exasperation. Not only did they once more meet at Alice's home, and exchange the venom of jealous hatred, disgust, and distrust, but Alice and Thurley were away for a ride in the park and had left no word as to when they might return. Both men went off wrathfully, to inundate the place with flowers.

Alas for plans! The quiet ride, intended by Alice and Thurley for a little slipping away together, for much needed calm and subsidence of nerves and pulses, had been metamorphosed, almost at the moment of departure, into one more extraordinary experience.

Grand Duke Karl-Wilhelm, youthfully confident that American manners were absolutely informal and different from those of civilized communities, had translated Thurley's hospitable remarks with a literal license positively touching. He had come unexpectedly this afternoon, because he wished to come, and had found an earlier arrival on the scene, in American tailoring, a bit impractical. Indeed, he apologized profusely for this somewhat tardy appearance, when the dictates of his heart and sentimental system would have urged him to the scene the very next morning after his formal introduction.

Alice and Thurley, with one accord, had invited him into the carriage. He sat himself down by the "Prin-

cess" with an alacrity that could leave no doubt of the happiness he declared to be his portion, and forthwith desired to know of Thurley and Madam Van Kirk if their tongues were accustomed to French. His joy could scarcely have been concealed when he learned that Alice was helpless and Thurley fluent in the Gallic language. Nevertheless, he continued for a time to address them both in German.

He was a pleasant youth, despite the fact that he had fallen hopelessly in love. His observations, as quaint as a child's, amused his companions immeasurably. The buildings, the American women, and the brilliant winter sunshine, astonished him in nearly equal degrees. He announced, however, that of the three he preferred the women.

"Is it very difficult to become an American citizen?" he asked quite seriously. "Could one be made of me?"

Alice replied that five days usually bestowed the manners, clothes, and money-madness, and five years the vote, upon all foreign aspirants to this red-white-and-blue preëminence.

"Ah!" said the Duke. "And how far from New York are the Mormons?"

"About five minutes' walk from Trinity Church," said Alice gravely. She added that the sect of Brigham Young and his followers was three thousand miles to the westward.

"And so many beautiful women here?" said the Duke, solemnly shaking his head. "One must live here longer to comprehend the American men."

Thurley regarded the Duke amusedly. "And should you like to become a Mormon?"

His eyes glowed with all his youthful fire and pent-

up eloquence as he turned them reproachfully upon her. "Princess!" he said in French. "After this discovery — of you!"

Her color mounted with the undulating beauty of a zephyr over meadow clover. "I thought it was your discoveries — of our women, you know — that aroused your interest in that obsolete religion." Her answer was in German.

He adhered to the tongue that he knew obscured his observations from Alice.

"For the others, yes. For me — Ah! what happiness I have known since I came upon you in your home! But you shall tell me, Princess, must you live always here to be content?"

Thurley smiled, and replied in the Teuton tongue. "I hope to be contented wherever I may live."

His eyes became imploring. "Have you no little word for me alone, in French?"

"How little?" she answered. "There is always '*non*,' you know."

"Ah! How helpless I am!" he declared. "Those who have traveled far to find you — do you treat them always thus?"

She could not resist the temptation. Her answer was in the tongue he desired. "You are certain you came to New York to find — me?"

He reddened; but did not for a second drop his glance, held magnetized by her own.

"How could it be otherwise? Have not the Fates quickly brought me to your side and given me back my joy a thousandfold?"

"But — your Excellency —"

"Not 'Karl,' when I asked it so earnestly, when



I search no farther in all America to satisfy my heart? ”

“ There are so many things to talk about — before you return to Hertzegotha,” she said, her own glance falling in the uninterrupted ardor of his eyes. “ Do you not very soon return? ”

“ How shall I say — unless you say it for me? Princess, there are beauties of the land, beauties of the people, beauty of the life in Hertzegotha, as you would be certain to know. Will these not appeal to you and call you presently there? ”

“ Call me there, your Excellency? ”

“ You shall make me yet to curse that word ‘ Excellency,’ gracious Princess though you are,” he told her warmly. “ Why shall I hesitate to confess to you the love grown wild for utterance in my heart? Is it treachery to your love of America for me to beg that you go to Hertzegotha at my side — my Princess and Duchess and companion? ”

“ Good gracious! ” said Thurley in English, turning suddenly to gaze aside where carriages by scores were rolling by. “ Oh, your Excellency, perhaps it is someone you know! ”

His eyes followed hers to a landau wherein two women were bowing and smiling.

“ You know them,” said Alice, bowing as she spoke, “ the Custers? We’ll have to be careful, my dear, or our friends will think we have cut them.”

Thurley immediately began, in her animated way, a description of various friends, in whom the Duke was interested less than in Mars’ theoretical policemen. It was anything to interrupt and forestall his uncomfortably ardent declarations.

Alice, with her customary grasp on the situation, rose to the moment's requirements superbly. She had readily divined more than half of the cause for Thurley's abrupt discomfiture. She had seemed absorbed in the passing show; but all her faculties had nevertheless been focused on the looks and speeches of their guest, whose obvious madness over Thurley had much more amused than alarmed her.

She was naturally in possession of all the facts and developments resultant from Thurley's interview with Baron von Hochhaus, and, far more than her protégée, was pleased at the turn of affairs. She was planning such a dinner as Gotham's swelldom had never yet experienced. She meant it to be the one sensation and triumph of the season. Already a brilliant success was promised, and now she felt as if the gods of chance had cast to her hand the most amazing combination of drawing cards conceivable in her "Princess" and the Duke.

She thoroughly expected sagacious New York to discover his Excellency with its normal celerity for obtaining and printing news. She had scarcely a doubt that even this ride would discover his identity in a measurable degree.

It did. In the briefest time their carriage was attracting such attention as almost to interfere with pleasure's traffic. In their eagerness to have a second, a third, or even a fourth good look at the brilliant young couple, delightedly conversing as they rode, a dozen women ordered their drivers back and forward most eccentrically, to give them their coveted view.

It became the topic of the park. The topmost notch of Thurley's skill, more than ably abetted by

Alice's maneuvers, was required to subdue and manipulate the young Duke's ardor sufficiently to conceal it from outside observation. Thurley talked like a fountain, spilling crystalline water of roses. It was like that, a fragrant, bright nothingness of conversation, as nearly endless as she could make it, and all of it chaining the senses of the Duke more and more by its unintentioned charm.

The drive became a trial before at last it was ended and his Excellency went his way, duly shadowed by one of Zagorsky's "brood," who had waited for hours for his man. Mindless of everything, and boyishly joyous, Karl-Wilhelm, already made acquainted with the New York habit of wooing through the offices of roses, proceeded at once to send such a mass of fragrant beauty back to Thurley as even Alice had rarely beheld.

To conclude a day hardly less exciting than some of its predecessors, the late edition of *The Evening Star* appeared with a wondrously ingenious sensation, to the effect that Princess Thirvinia and her fiancé, Grand Duke Karl-Wilhelm of Saxe-Hertze and Heimer, had been riding that day in Central Park.

The young Duke, so the story stated, had chartered a vessel to break all transatlantic records, in hastening New Yorkward to the errant Princess, known to have run away from Hertzegotha recently. She fled, it related, from a mating repulsive to her spirit, inasmuch as she had never seen her royal suitor. Their dove-like happiness had now been established in the prettiest royal romance known in years. The results had been brought about, continued the blend of fact and fiction, by the timely arrival of some mighty potentate from Kaiser

Wilhelm himself, said to be Baron Hotchkiss von Seydlitz, from Berlin, who was still sojourning in Gotham. A wedding journey back to Hertzegotha soon, in the private yacht of Kaiser Wilhelm, was the next development to be expected.

## CHAPTER XXXII

### A BAITED TRAP

THE wonderful weather broke. The days had been like jewels of a rosary — and were counted to the Cross. Gray skies, a bitter wind, and a snow that turned to rain and sleet, marked the first of the winter's footsteps, treading north. Behind this desolating bleakness there were scores of jewel days to come, granting forgetfulness of all but sunshine; yet all the world seemed an endless dreariness in face of this attack.

There had been another of the crowded days and nights for Alice and "Princess" Thurley, with another session at the opera, and supper afterward, made more than merely interesting by redoubled efforts on the part of Thurley's undiscouraged admirers to alter a "royal romance." More flowers had come, more letters, more declarations, and even a sparkling gem of poetry from tireless Algy Dearborn.

Saturday morning, pinching and acrid, with dirty remnants of snow still clinging in the shadows and protected spots, where the wind had hurled the flakes, brought about two incidents of exceptional significance in the fates of all concerned with Princess Thirvinia.

At ten o'clock a giant liner, in from Liverpool, landed four of the pick of Germany's and Hertzegotha's secret service officers, who were met by Baron von Hochhaus. They had followed him as swiftly as possi-

ble, and without delay were placed in charge of several men engaged by the Baron himself, and began at once the search for the truant young woman whom Thurley so closely resembled. The Duke had already been found — and was kept in sight and guarded day and night. The Baron also made an effort to protect Thurley from the lawless creatures known to be upon her trail.

The second incident appeared to be far less pretentious. It was simply the arrival of a letter for Thurley, sent through the Major's office, in the well known chirography of Edith Steck. It bore no sign of forgery. On the contrary it convinced the "Princess" instantly that her cousin had written every word — and written in anguish and alarm.

DEAR LADY BOUNTIFUL.—You will never forgive me, I know, for what I have found myself obliged to do, and for being once ill. I am back in New York, as you will notice from the date and address above. Don't be angry with me, please; for I was simply obliged to come. I was robbed in Lakewood, robbed of every penny I had in the world, all that you and your beautiful friend provided. I hardly even know how it happened,—simply that it was taken from my room while I was absent, and that, despite the efforts of all the hotel officials, nothing could be found of the thief or my funds.

I had done quite well for several days; but was feeling a slight relapse to my former complaint when this occurred. A kind and generous woman here gave me money to return to New York, and I have come to the old address for shelter, knowing of no other where I would be even slightly welcome.

I am ashamed to write you such a confession, and should

have tried to creep back to my old quarters and work, and conceal the facts, were I not so ill and incapable of giving any sort of promise of rent to the woman here who has once more received me under her roof.

I do not ask you to come; but felt I must at least acquaint you with these melancholy facts. It seems so needless for the world to be filled with women such as I. God bless you for all you have done is the prayer of your grateful

EDITH.

A more clever adaptation of words, phrases, and characteristics culled from a bright and cheerful letter could scarcely be imagined. It was Edith throughout as Thurley instantly conceded.

A great gush of sympathy, affection, and compassion surged to her heart. In such bitter cold as this for Edith to be housed in the wretched old hovel, where Thurley had found her before, was insupportable. And for Edith so to blame herself and apologize for being overtaken by calamity, was poignantly affecting. It was like her, like her self-denying ways, to attempt this return to New York and work, instead of informing anyone of her plight before she left the warmth and comfort of her place among the pines.

"Oh, I'll scold her for that!" said Thurley to herself. "Treating me as if I were an ogress, when all the poor dear had to do was to let me know of her trouble! She's got to go back at once!"

She went to Alice immediately and gave her the letter to read.

Alice was horrified. "Merciful heavens!" she said. "What awful things happen to the poor! Why couldn't some rich old woman have sustained this wretched loss? Why couldn't they come and rob me,

for instance, instead of a girl like that? We'll send James down at once."

"To drive me? Of course, if you wish to," Thurley answered; "but I went before in the cars and I'd just as soon do so again. In fact, to arrive there in a carriage—it's hardly the thing that Edith's cousin would do."

"Very well," said Alice, "if you must go, child, a morning like this, you may let James drive you somewhere near and wait to drive you home."

"Perhaps that might be better," Thurley agreed. "I'd like to take a few things, anyway,—just a few flowers and things,—and I wish I had an oil stove. Her room must be colder than a barn, a day like this; but perhaps I can send her one in."

"But she mustn't be there long," said Alice. "Send her right back to Lakewood; to-day, if she's well enough to go. Poor dear! she deserves it now if she didn't before."

Thurley was feverishly eager for the start. She changed her dress while Alice was 'phoning for the carriage.

In a wild, stinging sleet, once more hurled upon the city, she was presently driven away, with a promise to return by one o'clock.

The ride was long and cold; but Thurley was warmed by the tender emotions of her being and her indignation at the unknown thieves who had brought about Edith's discomfort.

She alighted at last a block from the house she had visited before, and trudged sturdily down the slippery walk, entirely unprotected from the storm, so filled were her arms with bundles.

The place seemed forsaken and forbidding, its win-



dows curtained, its aspect one of chill and dreariness. Thurley shivered for Edith as she mounted the steps and rang the bell.

After waiting a time that seemed very long, she rang again, and a faint sound of stirring within renewed her confidence that her cousin would soon be discovered. Then the door was opened and a little old woman blocked the way.

"Miss Steck," said Thurley. "I came to see Miss Steck. Is she in? May I go right up?"

"Third floor, rear," rasped the housekeeper shortly, and turned at once to disappear in the darkened hall below.

Breathlessly Thurley stumbled up the dimly lighted stairs, coming all rosy and panting to the door she remembered as having been Edith's before. Not a soul had she seen, not a sound had she heard in all the ghostly place. It had never occurred to her mind to be daunted or to hesitate a moment on her way.

She waited a moment only, to catch an easier breath, then knocked on the soiled, disfigured panel of the barrier.

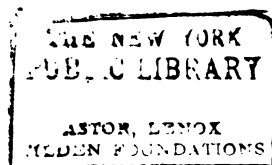
"Come in," said a weak, half-muffled voice, and Thurley, overburdened with her flowers, fruits, and comforts entered impetuously.

Instantly something heavy, blinding, and pungent with a stifling odor was thrown about her head. She dropped her bundles, obeying an instinct to fight for air, and struggled in a blanket, held roughly round and over her face, while her arms were pinioned to her sides.

"Edith!" she called, or tried to call, more and more stifled, and, fast succumbing to some dizzying, engulf-



*Instantly something blinding and pungent was thrown about her head.*  
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ing lethargy, she felt a sense of being closely surrounded by and gripped in the jaws of countless wolves, before blackness descended upon her.

Her last sensation was of all the room, turned hideously ebon, crushing in upon her, walls and ceiling, and then — she knew no more.

A large automobile, with a limousine body, closely curtained, had driven up at the curb outside and halted there. Five minutes later three wrapped figures, supporting between them what appeared to be a helpless invalid, descended the steps, made a hurried entrance to the car, with their charge, and were rapidly driven away.

## CHAPTER XXXIII

### A STILL ALARM

AT one o'clock, with the storm increasing in fury and threatening to become a blizzard, Alice Van Kirk was already impatient and blaming herself for having permitted Thurley to respond so recklessly in person to the needs of her unfortunate cousin.

She remembered the dread with which she had permitted Thurley's visit to the place on the former occasion. With a sense of uneasiness and indefinable premonition expanding in her more subconscious self, as she thought of the weather, of Thurley's unprotected condition, and her beauty that marked her at once for attention, she rebuked herself anew for permitting the girl to undertake another of these doubtful excursions alone.

She stood by the window commanding a view of the avenue as well as the cross street running east, eagerly scanning every carriage that might contain the "Princess." Countless important trifles were neglected. She owned herself frankly worried, even before she might in reason have expected Thurley home.

By half past one, with the avenue all but deserted, in the fury of the gale and driving snow, Alice was fidgeting, feverish, and thoroughly distressed. She felt so utterly helpless. She was aggravated by the knowledge that the house where Edith lived was a hor-

rid place, without a telephone and without proper heat for such a day. Thurley would be certain to contract a cold, if nothing worse occurred to make this adventure the last of its kind that should ever be permitted.

Alone with her servants, Alice felt more than ever isolated and haunted by multiplying fears. At two o'clock, unable to endure the uncertainty longer, and possessed of all manner of suggestions and suspicions, she ordered one of the servants to go at once, with the car, to the place of Edith's residence and determine what had happened.

"'Phone me at once, before starting home," she instructed, concealing her agitation as best she might, "and insist that Miss Thurley return without delay, even though her task is unfinished."

She was certain Thurley would come before the man could reach the house. She told herself she felt relieved, now that something had been done. Nevertheless, she oscillated back to the window times innumerable, straining her eyes to peer far down the avenue gloom, to detect the form of James and the dark maroon of her carriage.

When the 'phone bell finally jangled its demand for attention her nerves were all on edge. She hastened to the instrument.

"Well! Hello! Hello! Is that you, John? You're coming home?"

Like the voice of a ghost, hard riding on the storm, the hollow reply came back. "I couldn't find nothink of 'er, Ma'am. Not there, Ma'am. The 'ouse was happarently hempty, Ma'am — no one to hopen the door — nothink alive about the place, Ma'am."

Alice felt a sudden, overwhelming confirmation of

her nebulous fears. Something sank in her bosom leadenly. "Are you sure you had the right number, John?" and she gave it again with most distinct particularity.

There could be no doubt that John had applied for admission to the house that Edith had named.

Alice all but moaned. "But," she demanded, "where is James?"

"Drivink up and down, Ma'am, to keep 'is 'orses from freezing. He 'asn't seen nothink of Miss Thurley. 'E's stoppink where she posted 'im, Ma'am, to wait."

Alice hesitated, a settled conviction of disaster to Thurley taking unopposed possession of her being.

"John," she called, "why didn't you ask at the other houses near? Go and do so at once — and 'phone again."

"So I did, Ma'am," John replied across the wire. "I knocked up three of the neighbors, and two knows nothink at all, Ma'am, and the third old person says all the parties in the 'ouse I referred to moved out and went away this morning Ma'am, takin' a sick one with them, and goin' in a car."

"When?" cried Alice sharply. "Was it after Miss Thurley arrived?"

"The old party didn't say, Ma'am, not having seen Miss Thurley arrive. But four persons left before twelve o'clock; one, as she says, bein' happarently queer and so weak she had to be carried."

"Oh!" Alice swayed where she stood, but grasped at her mastery of self and voice with all her strength. "You — and James — may both — come home."

She did not hear his "Thank you, Ma'am," as she

hung the receiver on the hook. She simply stood stock still and stared at the instrument which had crystallized her alarms.

She was utterly faint, and felt a sense of helplessness, together with a wild, unreasoning wish to rush at once to the house herself, do something, anything, pervading all her being. Her conviction that Thurley was the victim of some fiendish plot was absolute. She had felt a premonition from the first — and its warning had been unheeded, so vague and senseless had it appeared. Yet it did not seem possible that anything actually harmful, malignant, could have come to the girl in a time so brief as this.

"It's the Princess business!" she exclaimed aloud, in a sudden lucubration, where her mind was groping for a reason. The Baron, the Duke, the others, she thought, were someway responsible. There was something political, something hidden, in a matter involving so much to Hertzegotha; but — what? Why take Thurley, whom the Baron knew to be an American girl?

Her thoughts ran wild as she stood there, big eyed with fear and helplessness. The runaway Princess might have died — and the Kingdom require her double! So much was at stake, as the Baron had said, and he himself had requested Thurley to continue in her rôle!

But what to do, and how to discover anything, and how to save the trusting girl she had grown so dearly to love. Her natural thought was the Chief of Police and all the scions of the law. She even started a step toward the 'phone to alarm every station in the town.



But she halted instantly. To advertise the disappearance of the girl like this might be exceedingly unwise. It would warn the possible conspirators, who might have committed some act of violence; it would wholly divulge the final facts as to who Miss Thurley was. Moreover, it might not be a case for the bungling police, especially if the Baron or the Duke was concerned.

But something must be done — and done at once! To stand here, inactive, paralyzed with dread and fear of some terrible thing that had happened, was the action of a child. There must be something — there had to be something to do! Yet to whom could she turn, and what should she say, and how act swiftly and effectively to get the "Princess" back?

The 'phone bell rang again, and she started galvanically, her hand flying quickly to her heart. A wild hope surged through her fears. It might be Thurley!

With nerveless hand she caught at the black receiver and placed it to her ear. "Hello!"

"Hullo!" said a cheery voice, across the wire. "Is that you, Alice? This is Robley. It's such a gem of a day I thought perhaps I'd find you in, and you'd let me come, just to celebrate putting my wrist back in commission. What do you say?"

She had never felt so glad in her life for the thought of a man to give her help. Of all persons in the world, including her absent husband, none could have been more welcome in her helpless plight than Robley Stuyverant.

"Oh, come at once!" she answered in the instrument. "Come just as soon as you can!" She would trust no more to the wires, which not infrequently leak, but

sank into a chair, already made weaker for the very thought of leaning on someone else.

She had nearly ten minutes in which to calm herself before Robley was admitted below. He was directed at once to Alice's one particular "real home room," where he had no sooner entered than he realized something was amiss.

"Alone?" he said, as he gave her his hand — the right hand, offered for the first time since his accident. You're pale. Not ill, I hope?"

"Sit down," said Alice, so absolutely colorless and smileless that Stuyverant was alarmed. "Something dreadful has happened, Robley — and Heaven must have sent you to the 'phone! I need you so!"

"Nothing has happened to Miss Thurley?" he said, his own dearest thought thus prompt to apply the worry accurately. "What is it, then?"

"Heaven knows I wish I knew!" she said, and rapidly, briefly, she reviewed the entire morning's events, including the statement of the servant John, who was due to arrive at any moment.

"I don't know what to think or how to act," she presently concluded, having risen to walk erratically and nervously about the room. "I am simply convinced she was lured to the house in question on a blind and has been abducted, spirited away — if it isn't something worse! I hailed your coming as a godsend. Now tell me what to do!"

Stuyverant's face had assumed a set expression of intensity, heightened by pallor. The depth of his feeling for Thurley had never been gauged before, and the grip at his heart could not measure it now, as it was at length to be measured.

"Who in Heaven's name could have a motive, a reason for desiring to abduct her?" he asked. "That is the first thing to know."

"You have read in the papers that Grand Duke Karl and Baron von Hochhaus are both in town," said Alice, "both having come to America in record-breaking haste, to search for Princess Thirvinia —"

"Yes; but these newspaper rumors —"

"Both the Baron and the Duke have been at this house!" Alice interrupted. "The Duke has all but insisted that Thurley go at once with him to Hertze-gotha."

Stuyverant stared at her blankly. "They've both been here? It is not a newspaper yarn? The whole thing might be a sort of political intrigue? The Baron also made demands, or requests?"

"Requests entirely," said Alice, who had checked herself at the very brink of revealing the truth concerning Thurley's origin. "Don't you see that almost anything terrible could have happened, that it must all have been a trick?"

Stuyverant had risen, even as Alice once more sank in her chair. "Perhaps I haven't any right to interfere," he said; "but Thurley chose a life for herself, perhaps even escape from her country and the Duke. She is more to me than perhaps you realize. Her wishes and her rights — rights to freedom and the liberty to go unmolested to give her kindness and sympathy to the afflicted — have got to be respected! Such conduct as this would be unpardonable, even in Emperor William himself! I mean to get to the bottom of this — no matter what the sacrifice, or who may be involved! I'll find her, I'll help her, I'll get her back, if they shoot me down for my pains!"

"But do something now, this minute," said Alice, "before it is all to late! We haven't any time for walking up and down and talking! What do you advise?"

"The first thing to do is to make ourselves sure that something is wrong — some plot, some trap has been laid. The letter, you say, was from a girl she sent to Lakewood some time ago?"

"An Edith Steck, who wrote that she had been robbed and had therefore returned, and was ill and greatly in need, at her old address, the address where Thurley had gone to see her before."

Stuyverant went to the 'phone and snatched the receiver from the hook. "Give me the Western Union Telegraph Company in a hurry!" he demanded a moment later. "I haven't time to look the number up."

"What is it?" said Alice. "What do you mean to do?"

"Wire to Edith Steck at Lakewood. You said she's at the Pines? If she's there all right, we'll know it was all a job."

"But her letter, mailed right here in town?"

"Perhaps a clever forgery. It's possible — Hello! Western Union? Take a message, please, and make it a special with paid reply, and charge me any price you like, but get it off and the answer back in an hour. Yes, Robley Stuyverant. All right, ready? 'Miss Edith Steck, Hotel Pines, Lakewood, New Jersey. Kindly wire your condition at once. Important. Reply paid.' Sign it 'Robley Stuyverant,'" and he added Alice's address. "Thank you. Rush it, please. Good-by."

"But why the girl's condition?" said Alice excitedly. "What will she think?"

"Anything she pleases — perhaps that some situation depends on her health. The main idea is to find out at once whether she is there or not."

"Then why not use the long distance 'phone?"

"I'm an ass!" he declared, and back he shot to the instrument and was presently making his demands.

Fully twenty minutes of time were consumed before the connections could be made. Both Robley and Alice were pacing restlessly to and fro in the meantime speculating, surmising, attempting to deduce from the little they knew what might be lying beneath the deed so boldly and unexpectedly committed.

James and John had both returned, and were neglected, while Stuyverant waited on his wire. Then at length the bell rang out its call and the Hotel Pines was on the farther end, the clerk's voice sounding so clearly that Alice could distinguish every word.

"Miss Steck is here, yes, sir," said the voice. "Stood at the desk not five minutes ago, asking for a letter. Shall I call her to the 'phone?"

"Thank you, no," said Stuyverant. "Is she well?"

"She said so, and she looks it."

"Thank you. Kindly let her know a wire is on the way, asking about her health, and tell her the 'phone was a second thought and not to bother with an answer. This is Mr. Stuyverant speaking. Thank you. I think of nothing further. 'By." He turned to Alice. "My suspicion is confirmed."

"Thurley was lured to the house by a forgery?"

"Without doubt. I want to see James and John a moment; then I'm going myself to that house."

"I'll get you the letter," said Alice. "I'm sure it was left in Thurley's room."

## CHAPTER XXXIV

### A SHATTERED HOPE

NEW YORK is filled with houses of indifference, degraded and degrading old shells, where anyone, of howsoever dubious a calling, may rent a shelter, alleged to be "furnished," and be certain no questions will be asked, no matter what the uses to which the apartment may be adapted.

The house where Edith Steck had found her miserable lodging was one of this character, as Stuyverant realized as soon as he entered the door. He was therefore handicapped at the outset, since no one resident therein would divulge the slightest fact that might be concealed or evaded, by ignorance or art.

The same dull little female creature who had admitted Thurley opened the door at his knock. She was either half deaf, half idiotic, or an excellent actor of the part. By dint of repeated questions and not a little flattery, Stuyverant elicited the information that she was not the landlady, that the latter was out, and had been for two or three days, and also that some "perfect lady" had occupied the room once rented to Miss Steck for several days.

The "perfect lady" had been veiled when she came and had never been seen by this informant, who was merely a servant in the place.

This was deception number one, for she herself was proprietor of the utterly neglected house. Stuyverant paid her a dollar to take him to the room in question,

alleging that a young woman friend had called there that morning and left a trifle behind.

The "trifle" was on the floor, when he came to the place—the bunch of roses Thurley had carried to comfort a comfortless soul. Convinced that no one else could have taken them there, Stuyverant took them eagerly, then glanced about the place.

It was simply a wretched little back-hall cave, dirty, ill-smelling, abominably furnished with rickety old junk, and littered everywhere with half-smoked cigarettes. There was nothing, absolutely nothing, to furnish the slightest clue as to recently departed occupants, save the roses already secured. What other parcels Thurley had brought had been carried away with herself.

When Stuyverant left he possessed the meager intelligence that the "perfect lady" of the veil was tall and that several men had called to pay her their respects at various times. His most skillful corkscrew methods could extract no more than that. As a matter of fact, the wizened little woman knew almost no more herself. She had seen little of her recent guest and nothing of her departure.

Stuyverant acknowledged to himself that he was almost as much in the dark as he had been half an hour earlier. He felt certain that Thurley had actually been to the room and dropped her roses at the moment of some attack. He was convinced it was she who had been seen placed helplessly in an automobile. But concerning the motive, Thurley's condition when abducted, where she was taken, and the perpetrators of the outrage, he was helplessly at sea.

He telephoned to Alice, relating the little he had managed to discover; then informed her that he would call

by eight at the latest, deliberately set to work to discover, if possible, the abiding place of Wenck and Baron von Hochhaus.

Some hazy idea of confronting the Baron and possibly surprising from him even the merest hint concerning Princess Thirvinia was in his mind, together with a wonder at himself for daring to presume so far as to meddle with the state affairs of a foreign Kingdom and its royal truants.

He only knew he loved this glorious girl, who had come to his assistance in the park. He only knew he must serve her now, if it lay in his power, with the final drop of blood in his heart.

But his search was vain. For more than two hours he was driven up and down, from one small high class hostelry to another, before at last he was rewarded by the information that two Germans, neither one named Wenck or Baron Hochhaus, but who might have registered under pseudonyms, and might have been the parties sought, had stayed in this house two days. They had gone together; but no one knew where, as neither received or expected letters here and had left no future address.

It was nearly half past eight at night, and the storm still raged savagely, when he came again to Alice Van Kirk's — to be mocked by his evening's search.

Both Wenck and Baron von Hochhaus had arrived five minutes before him, and Alice had just come down!

Tempted to send in his name and request admission to the conference, Stuyverant curbed the impulse and went to the great empty drawing room to wait impatiently the outcome of this wholly unexpected development.



Alice, in the reception room, had scarcely more than greeted her distinguished visitor, concealing as best she might her state of agitation, when the servant, acting on instructions, quietly announced Robley's arrival.

She hesitated a moment, on the point of asking Stuyverant in; then resolved on a course whereby she might a little sound the Baron and possibly discover vital facts by the policy of permitting him to reveal the purpose of his visit while she continued to act as if nothing had occurred.

The Baron was laboring under rigidly suppressed emotions. Grave fears were entertained by himself and Wenck, concerning not only the young Duke Karl, but also Princess Thirvinia, still missing and perhaps never to be found. At most, his secret service officers had learned that some young woman, exceedingly beautiful and unknown, had recently succumbed to sudden illness in Jersey City, under conditions that vaguely suggested she might have been the royal runaway they sought. And Grand Duke Karl, readily run to cover upon his second visit to the Van Kirk mansion, had madly proclaimed his love for "Miss Thurley," whom alone he wished to wed.

The Baron was thus doubly bewildered and harassed. If the Princess still lived and was discovered, these two must wed and be returned to Hertzegotha forthwith. If it should be discovered, beyond peradventure, on the other hand, that Princess Thirvinia had paid for her folly with her life, it might not be altogether preposterous to persuade Miss Thurley, as her double, to assume her royal place. The adjustment of a matter so delicate was not a simple affair.

The Baron was not in the least discomfited now to discover Thurley temporarily absent from the scene.

"I shall approach the subject of my appearance frankly," he said to Alice, as soon as mere conventional greetings had been exchanged, "and perhaps it is as well to request permission to ask a few questions of yourself at once."

"Please feel quite at liberty to do so," said Alice, masking her excitement and feeling of doubt with a smile. "Perhaps I may be able to assist you."

"Please acquit me of any desire to intrude personal curiosity in a matter become exceedingly grave," he begged courteously, "and permit me to apologize in advance for the necessity of pursuing my country's requirements in a matter of some delicacy."

Alice nodded, and he continued.

"Perhaps Miss Thurley has already acquainted you with the substance of our last conference?"

"Yes, to some extent."

"That is well and should save considerable time. May I now inquire what attitude of mind Miss Thurley expressed or betrayed concerning his Excellency the young Duke?"

"Why," said Alice, "I think she hardly knew herself."

"He was honored by a carriage visit with yourself and Miss Thurley recently?"

"He drove with us, yes."

"I am aware of his instant infatuation with and high regard for your protégée. Is it possible now, or might it ever be possible for Miss Thurley to requite his esteem — his love, in a word — should occasion arise to make such an outcome desirable or expedient?"

Alice was certain now the genuine Princess was dead and Thurley politically required. She was almost equally convinced that Thurley had actually been abducted for this reason and the Baron was here to make all possible amends, without, however, relinquishing his captive.

She answered incautiously, "Was this the reason you desired and requested her to continue in the rôle, somewhat thrust upon her by an overzealous public?"

He colored slightly. "Certainly not. At the time of that request no such necessity seemed even remotely suggested, believe me, Madam. There may be no such necessity now. Perhaps I am premature in preparing for any such emergency. I have merely asked you the question."

Alice felt, a little, the constraint of his position. She resolved upon a bolder stroke.

"A young woman like Thurley might learn to care very dearly for any handsome young man; but not, Baron Hochhaus, by force!"

He looked his genuine surprise. "By force? Most certainly not, my dear Mrs. Van Kirk. Miss Thurléy's entire coöperation, if not her voluntary, spontaneous response to the young Duke's exalted emotion, would be an absolute essential to the furtherance of any such development as fancy and necessity might presuggest at this perhaps untimely moment."

Alice had almost hoped for proof that the Baron had procured Thurley's spiriting away. She could have been certain, at least, of the girl's comfort, security, and freedom from violence or danger. Now she underwent a doubt, so entirely candid was the Baron's speech and demeanor. Yet she tried another tack.

"Is not the matter, the question, after all, one to be answered only by Miss Thurley herself?"

"Most certainly, in its finality. Yet I welcomed this opportunity of questioning yourself, her confidant and friend, as a diplomatic forestep, should occasion arise for any such negotiations later. It is highly probable that such a proposition may never be broached again. I sincerely trust there may be no such necessity. Indeed, my next inquiry may occasion some astonishment for its opposing character."

Alice was thoroughly puzzled, and, losing a species of hope to which she had clung, since if Thurley had to be carried off because of foreign politics, it were better far she should be in the hands of the Baron than caught in the toils of conspirators wholly unknown. She grew impatient to demand all the Baron knew. Yet still she smiled.

"Your next inquiry?" she said. "Directed also to me?"

"It is perhaps just as well directed to you." He leaned a little nearer. "In the event of our State's desire in the matter, would it be too much to request Miss Thurley to refuse to see more of the Duke, to discourage him finally, once and for all, dismiss him with friendship at most, bidding him return forthwith to Hertzegotha, there to resume the obligations of his life?"

Alice gazed at him blankly, amazed at such a question, on the heels of what had preceded.

The Baron gave her no time to reply. "I perceive I have too far presumed upon your relationship with Miss Thurley," he hastened to add. "May I beg the privilege of an interview with Miss Thurley herself?"

Alice's final hope was gone and with it her wish or need for further concealment. She rose abruptly. "But, Baron Hochhaus, Thurley is not here. She is gone! She has disappeared. I have the most terrible fears for her safety — her life! I hoped that you had abducted her — caused her abduction — anything but this horrible uncertainty and dread!"

The Baron too had risen. His face betrayed his complete astonishment and shock. "Gone?" he repeated "Abduction? You do not mean to say —"

"She went this morning to assist an ailing friend — or so she thought. The letter that summoned her was evidently a forgery, a blind. I am fearfully distraught. Mr. Stuyverant has been the only one to help me. He has just come in from a fruitless search of the house where she went this morning."

The Baron's distress was more than mere compassion; it was grave concern. He had feared for some such development. He had known of the dangers impending and surrounding the putative Princess when requesting Thurley to continue the rôle. He had even made efforts toward the discovery and apprehension of Zagorsky and her following; but had felt the discovery of the genuine Princess and the protection of Duke Karl to be a more immediate pressure upon himself and his men. Now that this outcome had established the menace to Princess and Duke, he was startled, as well as afflicted with a sense of guilt. Yet he dared not betray his convictions as to what had happened to Alice Van Kirk's protégée.

"I am shocked at this intelligence," he said in all sincerity. "Believe me, I shall make every possible endeavor to assist you in discovering and recovering

your companion. Excluding myself, you have no suspicions as to who might commit such an outrage?"

"How could I have?" said Alice. "She hadn't an enemy in the world! I was certain it must be something political, something I may have brought upon her by permitting a silly world to believe her your Princess Thirvinia!"

The Baron took a quick, impatient turn down the length of the rug and back. His perturbation was obvious. His rage against Zagorsky was consuming. "That such a thing could happen, in daylight — here in your city!" he said. "The punishment should be so swift and terrible for crimes of this dastardly nature! You shall have my help! Did you say Mr. Stuyverant has come? I esteem him my friend. I may see him — now?"

"I wish you to see him, please," said Alice. "But he is not aware that Miss Thurley is not Princess Thirvinia, a matter which I prefer to leave undisturbed, if possible."

"The suggestion meets my entire approval and desire," said the Baron, and Stuyverant was summoned to the room.

The meeting between himself and the Baron was cordial. Then in the briefest time he was made acquainted with the Baron's innocence in the present matter and his earnest desire to promote the greatest possible activity for Thurley's return to her friends. Hochhaus did not, however, cast an illuminating ray upon the facts in his and Wenck's possession concerning Zagorsky; and Wenck, remaining in the farthest corner of the room, was barely aware that important complications had developed.

Stuyverant related all he had found at the house and room where the trap had been prepared, adding a brief account of the means whereby he had discovered that Edith Steck was still at Lakewood.

Reflecting that death could have claimed Princess Thirvinia, the Baron was thoroughly disturbed and incensed. Convinced that an effort would be made to entrap or even assassinate the Duke, he became a wary, sagacious element in the game, primarily actuated by his country's needs, and relentlessly pledged to the conservation of its integrity, no matter what the sacrifice to other beings or their nations. And yet for the adequate punishment of Zagorsky and her lawless followers he would almost have given a hand or an arm, to be lopped from his sinewy body. His agitation seemed to Stuyverant a confirmation of Thurley's royal character.

There was nothing to be done that night, however, save to counsel Stuyverant to avoid the municipal police and report for a conference the following day with the secret agents imported to search for the Princess.

The address for which Robley had searched all evening was readily supplied, together with the names under which both the Baron and Wenck were registered, after which, with every assurance of his lasting friendship and zealous action in this calamity, Hochhaus withdrew, leaving Alice, and Stuyverant as well, blindly groping for a hope or a clue upon which to proceed in the morning.

## CHAPTER XXXV

### THE ICE BLUE EYES

WHEN Thurley awoke the day end sun was obliquely breaking through the clouds and storm and streaming coldly in at the window of a barren room, the features of which suggested the hazy continuance of an ugly dream. Her mind was dazed and uncertain. She was ill and faint. Only the dimmest shadows of memory came to restore the morning's occurrences. Vaporous ghosts of her last sensations at Edith's room haunted her half illumined mind. She closed her eyes, vaguely convinced that she was lying in her bed, and must soon arouse and prepare to go down to her work with Major Phipps. She felt she had overslept, dreaming some wondrous experience like a modern fairy story, wherein she had almost been a Princess — almost been —

She opened her eyes again, feeling something strangely hard in her hand. It felt like a chain; but she did not immediately raise it, or raise her head to see. She was still too weak, too indifferent. The sunlight pained her eyes. What a strange room it was, after all, with its broken ceiling, its ragged walls, and the shattered chair and table!

A pain went through her head, as certain functions of her heart and blood resumed their normal ways. With a hurtful throb a frightening memory surged through the dullness of her brain. She sat up suddenly, turning actively and staring with blazing eyes



at a woman who sat on a second bed, a foot removed from her own.

Confusion, rushes of blood to her brain, disordered recollections, and new alarms plunged pellmell into the cavities of her skull, congesting her brain with illness, pains, a tumult of thoughts and emotions. A sickening sense of revulsion overwhelmed all else momentarily, as she recognized, but failed for a second to place, the eyes at which she was gazing.

Then she knew them — those poisonous, ice blue eyes so intently fastened upon her that night in the Horse Show box! A shudder of cold, and weakness and disgust, passed rapidly through her frame, for the woman smiled — and her smile was worse than her eyes!

“Oh!” said Thurley, and she sank on the pillow of the couch once more, racked by pains and haunting dread.

“Come to at last?” said Zagorsky in German, her utterance one of sneering and contempt. “Didn’t know where you were at first, or how it happened? Think how you can pass the time guessing where you are and why you came!” She laughed abominably. “It wouldn’t be so comfortable and warm if I didn’t have to stay in the room myself, I can tell you that! So thank your fortunate stars I’m here!”

The vapors and ghosts of memory in Thurley’s mind became real substance, with painful celerity. All events of the morning crowded back in their sequence, like a series of shocks, and again she felt herself being stifled and blotted from existence. She was wholly at loss to understand the situation or the reasons for anyone’s attack upon herself, however, and found the

woman here so utterly repellent that nameless fears were her portion.

Once more she became aware that something foreign lay in the grasp of her hand. She drew the hard thing upward, as she once more rose to a sitting posture. It was a light steel chain, secured to a girdle of similar metal fastened about her waist. She was still fully dressed. A new sense of chill went down her spine.

"What does all this mean?" she said, her hand going up to her cheek and forehead. "What have I done to be chained here like an animal?"

"You've been one," laughed the woman mirthlessly, "a pampered, pretty animal, useless, if not even dangerous,—if you have the brains to understand me, which is doubtful,—and quite properly chained at last."

The other end of the chain was fastened to the bed, which was of iron. This Thurley comprehended in one discerning glance. Half formed fears of what it might all imply became inescapable dreads, as she once more faced the poisonous light balefully gleaming in the woman's eyes.

The sun ray was withdrawn, as a cloud obscured the great cold orb, and a chilly draft that an odorous oil stove could neither dispel nor greatly modify swept like another inimical presence across the girl's warm cheek.

"Have I ever harmed you?" she inquired, ill again with an intuition that appeal, query, or reason would be wasted on this malignant looking being. "Have I ever harmed anyone at all?"

"Harmed? Huh!"

Thurley tried another tack. "Will you tell me where I am?"

"Didn't I tell you to guess and occupy your time?"

All that Thurley could recall seemed very far away. She wondered how far it really was. She asked, "Is it permissible to inquire the time of day?"

"Nearly five o'clock."

"Thank you. Saturday?"

"Saturday."

Thoughts of Alice and of how she might be worrying crept between the baffled conjectures, alarms, and turmoil in Thurley's brain, and aroused her to something approximating anger. "This is infamous!" she said. "It was cowardly — inhuman!" She remembered Edith. "You haven't brought Miss Steck here, too, in her wretched condition?"

The woman reveled in her captive's impotent warmth. "Miss Steck is still in Lakewood — useless to the Cause."

Thurley looked at her, puzzled alike by this statement concerning Edith and the reference to a "cause," her active mind swiftly flashing from one speculation to another, in her effort to fathom the feeling of animosity against herself which the woman manifestly harbored.

"Still in Lakewood?" she repeated. "But her letter — oh!"

A dim and wavering light was vouchsafed her groping mentality. She comprehended first, in a somewhat hazy manner, that Edith had never written the letter, that a trap had been laid with Edith as the bait, that something lay behind it all too profound for immediate solution.

It wove in fantastic, elusive forms about the masquerade, the belief of all New York that she was

Princess Thirvinia. Yet why, even then this — Clear, vivid memories of the woman's eyes at the Horse Show — this woman's chilling eyes, the intensity of her gaze, the hatred in her face, and the awe and creep she had then inspired, blazed up with singular intensity, as if to reveal much more; but faded again and left the mystery black.

She was tempted for a moment to cry out protestingly that she was not Princess Thirvinia, merely a poor Cinderella, granted an hour of butterfly existence from a life monotonously gray and dull before; but she banished the thought at once. She knew it would be so utterly in vain and futile. The story would not be credited; it would appear the merest childish subterfuge of anyone similarly situated — precisely what the real Princess might attempt in hope of escape.

Subconsciously aware that the chain and the woman's watchful presence argued unusual precautions against her escape, therefore unusual importance, doubtless, in her capture, and remembering also the Baron's request that she continue in her rôle, she was momentarily more and more convinced that something political lay behind the affair of which she was the victim. The Baron had said she might perform a great service to his country.

Her fright gave way to thinking, planning impossible things, wondering why she was kept alive at all, speculating as to Baron von Hochhaus and how much he might have known of dangers surrounding the Princess.

Indignation succeeded a number of lesser emotions in her being, and yet she was weak and could not long retain anger adequate to the indignities here thrust

upon her. What to do was the question, not what might have been done. Was escape by any means possible, chained as she was and probably under the constant watchfulness of this icy eyed woman, who suggested some species of vampire yet unnamed?

She sank on the pillow, ill again, in a slight degree, from the reflex action of the drug employed to blanket her senses. She could think a little more clearly thus, and realized the uselessness of questioning the woman, who would certainly reveal nothing of the slightest importance.

The day was fast graying into gloom. She could see far out, through the dirty panes of the window, across the dreary landscape of denuded trees and snow. She had known it for open country at the first waking glance. The wind was swaying the trees. Snow wraiths drifted homelessly across the desolation. There was not a house in sight.

She looked about the wretched room, on that particular side of the couch, without a motion of her head, wondering just how far above the snow and earth was the window. Her thoughts went straying off to Robley Stuyverant involuntarily. Someway, she felt that if she could only let him know where she was, he would come though death itself should bar the way. She knew she would go to him in such a plight, and the thought warmed her heart like a flame of sacred fire. If she only knew where she was — if she only knew — if she could only tell him — tell him — tell — Her secondary drowsiness overcame her, and she slept there like a child.

It was less than an hour before she once more started to her senses, this time wide awake promptly and blink-

ing at a smoky lamp on the rickety table near the wall. The windows were heavily curtained. Not a ray of light could have found its way to the outer darkness of the land.

Two figures cast great shadows on the floor, one the woman's, the other a man's. The latter bore some steaming dishes in his hands and on his arm, with a waiter's universal skill. It was he they called Pelevin, an accomplished being with a mind, he always said, above the rôles for which the world had cast him.

At the slight sound made by Thurley in propping herself on an arm the woman turned. "Get up!" she commanded. "I am hungry. We dine."

Thurley was staring at Pelevin, whose face, she was sure, betokened better things than a questionable association with this woman. He did not turn, however, till he had placed all the dishes on the table; then, as he went, he cast a look on the captive girl that seemed, she fancied, friendly, if not indeed compassionate — all while Zagorsky's back was turned.

"Will you drink tea or coffee?" asked the woman, arranging the dishes on the table. "You see, I am generous, a good provider."

"Coffee, if you please," said Thurley, who trusted it might be as good as the bare suggestion promised. She was painfully hungry.

She rose from the bed, discovering her chain to be fully ten feet in length, even as the woman strode to the door and bawled to Pelevin to bring two cups of coffee. Then presently, with Zagorsky seated close at her side, Thurley assuaged her appetite on mutton stew, with bread and butter. The fare, though exceedingly limited as to variety, was nevertheless acceptable, being

well cooked and comfortingly hot. The coffee, in two large heavy cups, was brought a few minutes later, and once more Pelevin disappeared. It seemed to Thurley utterly incongruous to sit here, calmly eating with such a being, under such conditions; but she was a healthy, hungry young woman, and to starve would be the greatest folly.

Zagorsky was not a communicative or loquacious person. Thurley felt that queries, entreaties, or demands would be alike wasted on the creature, and therefore, both being greatly in need of bodily sustenance, there was nothing said during the progress of the meal. The same inherent shrinking from the adventuress was constantly present in Thurley's subconscious thoughts and movements; yet a sheer determination that she would not needlessly grieve, or otherwise waste her strength, possessed her absolutely and supplied her with courage, hope, and a wisdom rare and helpful.

When at length she pushed her empty cup away there was new resolve and a steady, renerving resentment in her being. She took one look at Madam Zagorsky, almost as if with the thought in mind of pouncing upon her, fighting it out, and then perhaps leaping from the window; but the wild idea faded instantly, leaving her sober sense a throne, and aware of the heavy odds against her.

She rose from the table, and her angry glance, which was also girlishly wistful, sped along the twisted links of the chain that bound her to the bed. She almost started at sight of a link supplied by strands of wire. The chain had either been broken, or two short pieces had once been spliced together, the wire being passed at least four times between the iron links, then twisted

hard and nipped off close and bent down level with the strands.

Thurley's breath came faster, merely with the thought of things perhaps made possible, could she once but tamper with the link. Then Zagorsky faced about, and Thurley sank on the edge of the bed with her eyes averted from the woman's.

Despite all the sleep she had taken that day, she presently felt herself heavy again. She made an effort, at first rather slight, then more determined, to cast the feeling off. A few minutes later she was exerting the utmost will power and mental goading of which she was capable to divest her brain of a lethargy creeping upon it.

The effort was in vain, her struggle impotent. She felt herself dimmed as by some heavy cloud, expunging very life. With her last protesting lucubrations she realized that the drowsiness was wholly unnatural — and was helplessly certain the coffee had been drugged.

With one despairing fear of what the night might bring upon her, — a fear that fought, but had not the force to battle down the narcotic, — she felt herself drooping head downward on the bed, and was once more inert and unconscious.



## CHAPTER XXXVI

### AN OFFER OF HELP

ZAGORSKY, being herself a heavy sleeper, once that condition of inactivity was achieved, purposed taking no chances with her captive. She had no mind or inclination for sitting up awake or otherwise assuming needless responsibilities with an important captive, while drugs were cheap and certain.

At length made certain that Thurley was wrapped in the folds and weavings of the baneful stuff employed, she closed the door upon her, went actively down the stairs, and strode unexpectedly in upon the three of her following, smoking in the kitchen of the house, over the dishes of their dinner.

Inasmuch as she nearly always approached them in this stealthy manner, the three were not unduly surprised. Pelevin quickly rose from his seat and offered her a chair. She sat near the stove; for the night was cold and the house leaked air like a sieve.

"So," she said, eying the men before her with her penetrative stare. "You are all convinced I know nothing of my business, and are all of a mind to murder the girl and get away?"

She had heard no more than a word on entering; yet had diagnosed the state of their minds unerringly.

"I was not yet certain," said the one called Max. "I was willing the matter should be discussed, with you to decide, or at least show cause for this dangerous delay."

"Ah!" said Zagorsky. "You were willing that I — the brains and all of this enterprise — should squeak like a mouse at the conference of lions?"

The fellow Jan was in a sullen mood. He was not to be immediately browbeaten into his customary submission. "We shall presently have the whole pack down upon us," he said. "We are not in Europe. They manage things differently here in America. Have I not reason to know? We should be satisfied to obliterate this much of the power and oppression of Hertzegotha now — take no chances of her escape — and work for the Grand Duke afterward."

"You mean murder and run — with our business half accomplished," corrected Zagorsky malevolently. "It is your usual cowardly method. I say I shall get them both, by midnight of to-morrow at the latest. As for escape, chained logs do not vanish in smoke through a keyhole and reëmbodify themselves outside to roll away."

"She is a bird in hand," insisted Jan, averting his gaze from the ice blue eyes he dreaded. "If you find the task too severe for delicate hands — It is business that must be done!"

"Do you threaten?" asked the woman quietly. "Let one of the three of you dare appear above the head of the stairs between this hour and eight in the morning, or all the three — if you have the courage between you!"

"But — eight o'clock!" said Pelevin. "This is very late."

"I sleep late," answered Zagorsky. "Have I inconvenienced myself for years to bring this capture about, only to disturb myself for no good reason now,

when at last I have earned my morning's repose? I repeat it, eight o'clock. The girl may sleep till nine."

Jan continued sullen and wedded to his topic. "Instead of the Duke appearing at the broken mill, you will have a posse at our heels. And even though it may be different, what purpose does it serve to keep the Princess here alive?"

"Several purposes, best known to myself," answered the woman leader of the business. "Even you should perceive there may be a final necessity of showing this girl to the Duke, at the window of the mill, before he will enter the trap."

"But mark my word, he will not come alone," insisted Jan. "One potentate in the grave is worth two in a cordon of police. Think you Hochhaus is unwary? Think you Karl-Wilhelm goes about unprotected, free to blunder to our trap?"

Max took his pipe from his mouth. "He is still in hiding from Wenck and the Baron," he supplied. "He is little minded for more coercion, here in the land of the free."

"I have only one question to ask," said Zagorsky calmly. "Who engineered this capture of the Princess, who brought about its success, who have been the failures heretofore?" She rose and stood facing the table, her back to the stove. "Bah! Of the three, you, Jan, are the least endowed with brains in this association. Yet I had not thought even you reduced to common, hurried murder in your utter lack of finesse."

"I know my duty," growled the man. "We'll see what we shall see."

"A threat?" she demanded as before. "If it comes to that, at least fling it out like a man!"

"I make no threats," said Jan, sullenly puffing at his pipe; "only —"

She waited; but he did not complete his sentence. "I understand," she said more soothingly, herself a little fearful of this blood desiring man. "When the hour arrives, it shall be you, no other, that has the deed, the honor, the glory, of the stroke."

He glanced up quickly. "It is a promise? All agree?"

"I am all — and I agree," said Zagorsky in a way of magnificence all her own. "And, that being settled, an hour for consultation."

The council sat till midnight, resolving there by the glowing stove the plans for assuring the coming of the Duke to meet a waiting doom. There were no more hints of mutiny; but all agreed that instantly, upon the possible appearance of deliverance sent for Thurley, the knife in the hands of Jan should do its work, no matter what the after consequences to any in the band.

Zagorsky retired a little after twelve. Thurley was sleeping like the Princess of legend, bound by a magic spell. In its corner the oil stove, rank with emanations, glowed all night like a beacon set to lure trusting ships on the reef.

At eight in the morning a thunderous and long continued pounding on the door roused Thurley from her torpor while still her captor rasped a song of sleep. It was Pelevin, ready to bring the breakfast, but desiring the dishes of the meal of the evening before. The door was locked, a precaution Zagorsky had taken on her own initiative, lest Jan be overzealous in the night.

She was roused at last, reluctantly and heavily

emerging from her hibernation, which Thurley duly noted.

The day had officially begun. It was destined to be a day of dullness, dread, and desolation, broken but once; in the morning, when the breakfast things had gone.

Zagorsky was summoned to the room below, and Pelevin returned for the earthenware cups, over which the woman had lingered. The door had been left a trifle open, Zagorsky desiring to hear any sounds that might be of moment above.

The man thus alone with Thurley abruptly placed the utensils once more on the table. He turned to the girl with a face transformed to one of contrition and shame.

"Ah! your Highness!" he whispered in a tragic undertone, suffused with intense emotion, "I can no longer bear that you shall regard me also with the hatred and dread, the suspicion and horror these others may inspire. I have waited to tell you, declare my loyalty, my friendship, my wish to assist you to escape!" And down on his knees the fellow sank, his hands held imploringly before him.

Thurley was startled, more than surprised, by the abruptness of his action. Something in his face the previous evening had a little prepared her mind for some such declaration. Yet she hardly knew what were best to do in the moment that might be vouchsafed them.

"Oh, if you would — if you would really help me!" she said, her own voice barely more than a whisper. "But what can I possibly do?"

"Your friends!" he said eagerly. "Let them know!"

Your royal fiancé! In an hour I must go to the village for meat. A letter, a note, to the Duke — the brave young Duke! Let me take it — if only a line!”

“But I have no paper, no pencil — My other friends —” she answered eagerly. “If I tell them all —”

“Ah! to ruin everything!” he interrupted imploringly. “If so many come, are seen from here, your life must pay the forfeit on the instant. This is predetermined. Let the Duke come alone, he only and I can help! Ah! a part of a letter!” He had snatched an old letter from his pocket and torn away the second sheet. “But a stub of pencil only!” This he likewise produced, with grime, from a pocket of his vest. “Write it — write it quick! There is not a moment to lose! And already I know where to find him!” The tears rolled swiftly from his eyes. “It is so little I may do; but your life shall be saved — I shall not have lived in vain — I shall have not have suffered shame, degradation, for nothing!” He dashed away the tears. “But write!”

Thurley was deeply affected by the fellow’s outburst of emotion. She felt new hope in the day. Quickly kneeling by the table, she turned once more to the man.

“Where am I? Where shall I tell him to come?”

“The village of North Winog, Long Island,” Pelevin whispered rapidly. “Tell him you are captive in the old mill, one mile out, to the eastward, where he shall come at nine o’clock to-night; but come alone, on peril of your life. Tell him you will go with no one else and to bring no help nearer than the village.”

Thurley started to write in feverish haste. She

paused. "But to-night at nine I may be drugged again and fast asleep."

"I am cook," he whispered. "I shall leave out the drug. You shall then pretend to sleep — and leave the rest to me."

She wrote again; but stopped to inquire: "This house is a mill?"

"At the front, which you have not seen. Ah! if we waste the time!" He had risen and now he tiptoed to the door and listened there intently. "It is nearly done? I must appear below."

"There — there!" said Thurley, signing the note, and she placed it at once in his hand.

He read it hurriedly. It was written in German.

DEAR KARL-ROBLEY.—I am captive in an old mill, one mile out to the east from village of East Winog, Long Island. You must come alone to save me, bringing no one with you nearer than the village, and at nine to-night! It is important that you come alone. You must remember that, or it seems I am sentenced.

Yours,

THURLEY.

"Karl-Robley?" he said inquiringly. "But his name —"

Thurley reddened. She had thought by this means it might be possible to get the intelligence also to Stuyverant, who, far more than all the Dukes in the world, might move effectively.

"A nickname," she told the man without the slightest hesitation. "No one calls him so but myself."

"The better then, that he will know it is from yourself," agreed Pelevin, hurriedly tucking the note in his

pocket. "The blessing of the God, if I shall be able to help you — my Princess!" Again the tears welled swiftly to his eyes, and, kneeling, he kissed the hem of her skirt, then hastened to his dishes, made a noisy clatter at the table, and sprang through the door to stumble awkwardly down the stairs which Madam Zagorsky was ascending.



## CHAPTER XXXVII

### THE BARON AND A KNIGHT

THAT morning brought little of comfort or hope to Alice Van Kirk, and nothing of relief to Robley Stuyverant. No news had arrived; the mystery of Thurley's disappearance and whereabouts remained absolutely unbroken.

Stuyverant felt doubly despairing. He had learned sufficient from the conference with the Baron to realize that Princess Thurley was tremendously essential to the integrity and future of Hertzegotha, and was thoroughly convinced that, should she be discovered and returned, after this, she must soon complete her alliance with the youthful Duke and completely withdraw from his own existence.

Nevertheless, his fanatical desire to serve her, to be, if possible, the one particular knight to reach her side and deliver her out of whatsoever dangers might impend, increased upon him hourly. If the Fates decreed that his love must be forever hopeless, it would not be thereby lessened. Come what might, that day in the park had knitted a bond between them that nothing could ever wholly sever.

A strange conviction that Thurley's doom hung close and loose above her head had haunted his thoughts since the very hour when he learned of the way she had gone. He had fretted with wild and increasing impatience because of this conviction. He was nearly be-

side himself, to be baffled, impotently ignorant of what he ought to do. This enforced inactivity and stupid waiting, while a night went by, seemed enough to drive him crazy. Of what avail was his eager love when he made not the slightest move?

Stifling an hourly repeated impulse to seek the aid of the city's police, he could scarcely wait, this Sunday morning, for the time appointed to meet the Baron at his rooms. When he came there at last the Baron was no wiser concerning Thurley than at Alice's the previous night. Two of his men were still to report; he could only advise further patience. Wenck was still away.

At eleven o'clock his two men came, with vital news, and were interviewed in private. They had found Princess Thirvinia.

That royally erratic young person was lying dangerously ill, unknown and unsuspected, at the home of some loyal, if humble subjects of Hertzegotha, living in unromantic Weehawken. She was unaware of the presence either of Wenck, the Baron, or the Duke in New York, and was too reduced to care.

Vastly disturbed by this intelligence, and yet in a measure relieved, Hochhaus was still tremendously concerned with the fate of Thurley Ruxton. The Princess might yet succumb and leave his Kingdom bereft, while the young Duke, ignorant of Thurley's disappearance, was still persistent in his declarations that he loved no one else in the world.

There was nothing to communicate to Stuyverant. Indeed, the Baron's perturbation grew with the very fact his men had brought him no report concerning the abducted girl. He had much to do to maintain the

secrecy hedging the Princess about, to provide her the finest medical attendance, to arouse the Duke to his highest sense of duty, and, if possible, aid with all his power in saving the girl he knew to be in imminent danger of her life, if not already slain.

He could only tell Stuyverant to wait. Later he went to Weehawken, skillfully disguised, since he felt convinced that his movements were closely observed by Zagorsky's agents, doubtless on his trail.

At three o'clock a message from out in Long Island arrived for the young Duke Karl. It was quietly intercepted by the Baron's agents and brought to his quarters at once, Karl-Wilhelm none the wiser.

Half an hour later the Baron returned, and the message was placed in his hands. Stuyverant, having been twice to Alice's, was once more waiting — and growing momentarily more desperate. Wenck had not only not appeared, but had not sent the slightest word.

No sooner had Hochhaus glanced the message over than he strode to Stuyverant's room. He was thoroughly aroused; but incisively keen of wit. He had leaped at the truth of things as a tiger leaps on its prey.

"Stuyverant, here it is at last!" he said as Robley sprang to his feet, prepared to blurt out his impatience with methods so lacking in action. "I rather thought that something in this nature might appear; but I didn't expect — Man, what do you think of this?" He held up a note to read.

"What is it? Something from Miss Th —"

"It's a bit of correspondence addressed to Grand Duke Karl and intercepted by my orders," interrupted the Baron. "Listen."

"EXCELLENCY — I have found Miss Thurley, and send you immediate word that you may hasten to her rescue; for you alone will she trust, so great is her present apprehension for her life, and so great is the warrant for her fears. She is a captive in the hands of political enemies of Hertzegotha, at a small village called North Winog, on Long Island, one hundred miles out, nearly, and is at an old mill, one mile to the eastward of the village, where she informs me one of the band has revealed a secret loyalty and desire to render her assistance. Through him only will her rescue be possible.

"You must come alone to-night at nine o'clock, bringing no assisting friends nearer than the village proper, lest you excite suspicion and thereby sacrifice her life on the instant. Be under the window at the stroke of nine — the window at the rear of the mill, and do not, for the love of heaven, attempt her rescue by force of numbers, or come otherwise than alone! The one man loyal to her Highness is expected to go out to-night and return at nine; hence one man approaching will arouse no suspicion. I shall await your advent myself in the village. For God and Hertzegotha,

OTTO WENCK.

"POSTSCRIPT.—I inclose confirmatory note from—"

Stuyverant, white with excitement, and crouching, as if for a spring of action, snatched the paper from the Baron's fingers.

"Pardon," he said; "but — where is it — where — village of North —"

"My dear young friend," admonished the Baron quietly, "wait! Don't you see —"

"Wait!" said Stuyverant wildly. "I've done nothing but wait all day! I want to get started! Don't you understand?"

"I do," said the Baron, "perfectly. There is more. You have not yet heard it all. This also was inclosed." He held up Thurley's note and read it, puzzled at once by its presence in the letter and the method of the address. "Dear Karl-Robley."

"What?" cried Stuyverant, more excited than before. "It's half addressed to me! Perhaps she expected — thought that I — Baron, I'll take a force of men — I mean that we — I shall go in my car to fetch her back! There may be no railway in miles! Can your men be ready at once?"

"Mr. Stuyverant, sit down!" commanded the Baron sternly. "Can't you see this is merely a trap?"

Stuyverant halted in the act of throwing on his coat, and the sable trailed on the floor. "A trap! It's Thurley's appeal — and it's half addressed to me! I don't understand. There's nothing to do but to get there as soon as the Lord will let me! Why should you call it a trap?"

"This letter was sent to the Duke. I told you that."

"It was; but — right there — Robley — his name isn't Rob —"

"And it's signed here Otto Wenck."

"Your man, I know; but nevertheless —"

"That's the lie of it, man!" the Baron interrupted. "Wenck, it is true is over there somewhere, and has made no report; but he's under another name and on no account would send me a line — or a line to the Duke with his own name actually attached!"

"You mean —"

"I mean that was my orders — absolute orders. Furthermore, he would never, in a case like this, send a line to anyone save myself, while it is perfectly pre-

posteriorous for him to urge the Duke into such a noose as this! A trap — a clumsy trap — and this sort of bait I've expected!"

Stuyverant paled. "But, good heavens, Baron, how could — This note from Miss Thurley — not a forgery, you think?"

"I am not prepared to say. It may be genuine; it may be all a lie. This Wenck note is a forgery — and clever as the fiends. It sums up all a trap, my son, to compass a double murder."

Stuyverant went white about the mouth. "Murder!"

"Sit down," urged the Baron more quietly. "This is a matter of life and death to the beautiful woman I feel you would serve to the uttermost limits of your strength."

"My life! My life! I mean it, sir!"

"Then, in the name of the Heaven you implored, be calm a little and assist me as far as you may."

"You think she's alive? She may be there — that village, North Winog?"

"It is the barest hope in the world. It is far more likely she is far away in another direction, — God alone knows where, — and yet, it is all we have at present, and you might at least investigate; though the dangers, I warn you, are great."

The younger man was confident. "I'll simply take a dozen men — picked fighters — gun fighters, at that — and clean up —"

"So I feared!" It was dryly remarked, and the Baron screwed up his mouth. "If she is there at all, and alive, your course would ring her knell the instant your men appeared. It is no idle threat, that part of

the letter that warns the Duke he must be certain to come alone, his friends no closer than the village. Of what avail are friends a mile away?"

"Then I'll go alone, though all the demons out of Hades —"

"And be quietly captured there beneath the window. When they find you are not the Duke, what then? And you wouldn't expect, with a letter as false as this, that Miss Thurley, as you call her, would be standing at the window waiting to leap into your arms?"

Stuyverant saw the situation, yet clung to a species of hope. "Good heavens, man! do you expect me to do nothing? If she's there at all, and in momentary danger of her life, I've got to take a chance — that's all!"

"And give yourself none," commented the Baron dryly. "If you mean to help in this affair, go over, if you please, to North Winog, with your car and your man, and ascertain, if possible, whether or not any strangers have recently come to that neighborhood in peculiar circumstances and are occupying any old mill."

"And then?"

"Then report to me, or at most adopt some sane expedient for the safe delivery of the captive, should you find her actually imprisoned and alive thereabouts."

"But you?" demanded Stuyverant. "In the meantime you are certainly as deeply interested — perhaps more deeply interested. Where will you be with your men? What will they all be doing?"

"Scouring the darkest, farthest corners of all New York," said the Baron laconically, "endeavoring to re-

trieve any time we may lose by sending you off to this village."

"Then you think she isn't there?"

The Baron smiled. "It would be almost too good to be true."

"I shall go and see," said Stuyverant. "God grant I may find her safe!" He flung on his coat, which had fallen to a chair.

"Amen to that!" answered the Baron, his fine old mouth slightly twitching, and his eyes suspiciously moist. Then he placed his hands on Robley's shoulders. "Don't take the slightest unnecessary risk, my boy," he added. "Serve her as far as you like, — with your life, if you must, — but be certain first it is a service. My affection for you is great. To sacrifice another life — youth — Take no risks, *no* risks that can do no good in the end."

Stuyverant was greatly affected. His fine young face took on an expression approximating sublimity.

"I would go through anything to serve her," he stated simply. "And because she has written 'Robley' here, I am certain she lives, and sent this note and expects — well, someone, at nine o'clock to-night."

The Baron could say no more. He wrung the young man's hand with tremulous intensity and watched him go out at the door. Then he sank on a chair, limp and wretched, staring at the carpet. He knew what the dangers were into which this youth would plunge, the dangers into which, he confessed, he had feared Thurley Ruxton would fall.

"God help us all!" he murmured. "I must serve Hertzegotha first!"



## CHAPTER XXXVIII

### THE ONE WEAK LINK

THE day with Thurley was one long monotony of fear, disgust, and helplessness. The windows had been finally uncurtained, late in the morning; but the day was gray and dreary, while the atmosphere within was murky and foul with odors from below, and the reek of the stove that kept the room slightly warmer than freezing.

Zagorsky remained at her captive's side almost constantly. She seldom spoke, and Thurley would never have addressed her voluntarily, since questions and pleading would have been of no avail, and conversation was impossible. As often as she encountered the ice blue stare of the woman's eyes, she shuddered anew with repugnance and the certainty of a gross, malevolent mind behind their baleful glistening.

She had found herself wrapped in an exceptionally long, gray cloak, patched and dirty, but at least of wool, and therefore slightly comforting, in this leaky old hovel, long before abandoned as a human habitation. She spent her time lying or sitting on the bed, or walking the few feet rendered possible by the meager length of chain.

She did not sleep again. From time to time she heard a murmur of voices, where the men below were repeatedly protesting against the delays of Madam Zagorsky. Now and again the woman descended on

the trio, to soothe or to domineer, as occasion might demand. Never for more than five minutes at a time did she thus leave Thurley to herself — and the girl was aware of the utter futility of attempted escape in such interim, or in the glare of day.

Twice she had dared snatch up her chain and try with her fingers to loosen the wires, where the twisted ends were nipped and bent over on the link. She had no intention of doing more than barely prepare the stubborn splice for possible tampering later on; but even this seemed quite impractical to fingers fashioned delicately and unprovided with a tool.

On the last occasion, nevertheless, she found an edge on the iron bed where the twist of wire, being once engaged, was readily bent backward on the link. It did not break, being tough and malleable, and she barely had time to bend it once more to its former position when Zagorsky again returned.

There were no more opportunities to labor with the wire, and at most it was merely possible for Thurley to sit there planning how, if her chance should come, she could bend and bend that metal prong till its point should finally snap.

She planned all day at a thousand things impossible and even extravagant. No thought had entered her mind again of attempting a struggle with the woman. She knew her strength could avail her nothing in a combat so entirely unequal. And the noise would disturb the men.

Her hope attached itself with childlike confidence to the man Pelevin, hour after hour. Her only fear concerning him was that of his inability, surrounded as he was by other men, to render the necessary help at the

vital moment. She had doubts again of the arrival of the note addressed to the Duke and Robley. It seemed to her she was very far from all the world of Gotham. The note might be lost, intercepted. The day being Sunday, it might easily fail of delivery. If no one should come that night at nine —

A fever of anxiety, hope succeeding doubt, eager planning for herself, and increasing dread and illness in this fetid room, was flaming her cheeks and eyes. The day was so frightfully long, the unknown fate impending, and the mystery as to why she had been thus entrapped, were so baffling and frightening as the hours wore slowly on!

She could not have known that Pelevin, clever actor that he was, had tricked and deceived her with shameless duplicity, playing on her feelings and credulity to procure her note to the Duke; yet she finally doubted even him. It was merely the accumulated despair to which she was the victim, making its pessimistic inroads to her courage.

She doubted everything at times, and was hopelessly haunted by instinctive alarms, as if the violence hovering in the air and lurid with murderous desire, was somehow communicated to her more receptive self, which could not interpret their meaning.

Yet back to her hope in Pelevin she fled, as if aware it was all she had, no matter how tenuous its substance. He had promised not to drug her coffee. If he should lie! She might be wiser to refuse the draft and take no chances! But the action, on the other hand, might readily excite the woman's suspicions, even against Pelevin.

Her fever rose with the waning of day, and when, at

five, the sun went down in a red streaked sky, suggesting blood and fire that somehow were not warm, she felt the landscape's desolation creeping coldly to her heart. She had risen from the bed so many times, in the spirit of restlessness increasing steadily, that she feared the woman must note her condition and pounce upon its actuating cause. With all the power of her mind's volition she remained at peace, attempting to convey an impression of sleepiness again, and dullness for lack of air.

"May we have the window opened for a moment?" she finally asked. "The air will be better for freshening."

"It suits me well enough as it is," said Zagorsky. "Once I heard of a man on the gallows who was given a glass of beer, from which he blew the froth. Someone questioned why he blew it away. He said it was not healthy — and then he was hanged." She laughed uproariously, shaking with mirth at the grimness of her joke.

A sickening conviction of doom settled at Thurley's heart. Ominous night and ominous threat seemed brooding together in the shadows that fell upon the snow bound world and house. There was nothing to do but wait — and wait for — God alone knew what.

Evidence of more uneasiness increased below the stairs. Something seemed amiss. Zagorsky was up and down repeatedly between the hours of five and six. There appeared to be no preparations for dinner or even a thought of eating.

It was all concerned with Pelevin, not yet returned from sending Thurley's note, with his own, to the young Grand Duke Karl-Wilhelm. It was half-past

seven when he came at last, and the news he brought was satisfactory.

Dinner was served to Thurley and the woman a little after eight. It was precisely the sort of meal supplied the previous evening; in fact, part of the stew still remaining unconsumed. Coffee was provided as before, the man Pelevin snatching at a momentary opportunity to nod at Thurley reassuringly while the cups were being placed on the table.

The man had no more than retreated through the door than Zagorsky was on her feet.

"Pelevin!" she called and, following actively, half closed the door behind her as she gave him some manner of instructions, delivered in Russian and barely above a whisper.

Instantly, for no absolute reason she might at the time have explained, Thurley conceived an extraordinary plan—to exchange her cup for the woman's! She did so before she could halt the action or reflect as to why it was done. Her heart, however, swung like a wind-swayed bell in its tower. Her hand shook as if with ague. She knew it was not with some sudden distrust of Pelevin she had acted; she had merely obeyed some blind intuition and prompting to be doubly safe, should treachery lurk in the drink.

Zagorsky returned almost immediately. The trifling sound that Thurley had made, transferring the heavy earthenware receptacles, had alarmed her frightfully. She was certain the movement had been heard and the ruse would be detected.

Partly to hide her confusion, partly to complete her action and force her own cup upon Zagorsky, she drank the portion now allotted to herself without even

waiting for sugar. She was drinking, indeed, when the woman came and resumed her seat at the table. Zagorsky glanced at her only once, a grim expression of satisfaction betrayed for a second in her eyes. She had feared Thurley might refuse the coffee altogether.

In the wildest flutter of excitement and fear, Thurley watched for the woman to drink. Her heart continued its tumult, which she was certain Zagorsky must hear. She rose from her seat and proceeded to the bed, watching from the corner of her eyes. Below the men left silently, to proceed to an old abandoned grist mill a mile to the east of North Winog.

Zagorsky drank, draining the cup to the dregs.

"Horrible water, unfit for any cooking!" she said, as the drug taste left some impalpable tang on her palate, and she rose and went over to the stove, renewing the oil in its tank.

Then she stood above its heavy gush of heat, while Thurley, watching with blazing eyes, presently remembered that she must seem to droop and sink into sleep as before.

She began the symptoms against which the previous evening she had struggled helplessly. Zagorsky, attributing her sense of comfort to the warmth of the stove and dinner, crossed to the door, bolted it fast, and returned to the ruby glare so impotent to dissipate the cold.

She was watching her captive narrowly, a thing that Thurley felt. Rising, Thurley shook herself, rubbed at her eyes, and briskly chafed her hands. She staggered a little where she stood, winking her eyes in the heavy manner compelled by the drug before. Back to the bed she sank, maintaining all her show of drowsiness,


and at length was prostrate on the pillow, her whole tingling being startlingly awake and trembling with suppressed excitement.

The drug worked slowly on Zagorsky. Sleep always came to her reluctantly and remained overlong, the morning hours invariably increasing her torpor. Nevertheless, her feeling of placid contentment now rose and engulfed her lurid brain. She sat in a chair beside the stove, somewhat exulting in the thought of a good night's rest ahead.

She nodded there, her sense of peace possessing all her body. Dimly she thought of nine o'clock and of work to be done by Jan and the others, when the trap should close its jaws. What need to bother herself? When that was done, the rest could follow quickly. And then, if a flight by darkness seemed advisable, a bit of sleep to start on would be well.

She rose, by making an effort, and moved across to her bed. An hour, at the most, she might nap serenely, and then — and then — She dropped herself down, or, rather, drooped, possessed of a sudden with a wild suspicion that something might be wrong. A flash of vivid, glaring light was seared across a portion of her brain. Like a lightning stroke that fails to reach the earth, the zigzag halted in the dullness, shutting out her intellect and faded on her night.

She tried to rise, to cry to the men — who were gone, as she dully remembered. She could neither lift the leaden mass of her shoulders and weighted skull, nor utter forth more than a gurgle. The sound she made was terrible to Thurley, lying there quivering with life. It was such an animal, savage sound, as of some wild beast that struggled with suffocating death.



Expecting almost that the creature would come, staggering possibly, but horribly vital and stubbornly active in her sinister intent, Thurley dared not move and dared not remain, and held her breath in fearful alarm, as she listened to hear the lightest tread.

It did not come. Zagorsky was down, her brain like a blackened frame, where fireworks, having expended their flare, die suddenly, with here and there a streak or a star of unattached and meaningless red, glowing vividly a moment on the velvet gloom that its previous brilliance has intensified. She was still awake, in a manner, sinking as one who drowns but is not yet wholly unconscious. Then oblivion claimed her for its own.

It was not until nearly half an hour later, when the woman was breathing with the stentorious gasps and irregular percussions of a gasolene engine, that Thurley dared to move. She rose then cautiously, glancing at once toward the inert mass the woman had become. The house was still; the silence, save for Zagorsky's breathing, was intense.

Thurley went to the lamp and turned it low, then crept to the window and tried to peer through the snow-lighted darkness of the night. There was nothing to be seen. She had no means of determining the time; but felt it must be fully nine o'clock, when perhaps deliverance should come.

Once more, at that, the clear bright light of her reason was cast illumingly upon the facts. Pelevin was a proved liar. The coffee he had promised should be harmless had been obviously drugged. Undoubtedly all his sympathy and loyalty had been a sham.

New forms of suspicion and dread rose before her vision, as she thought of the uses to which her note to



Robley might be put. She was terrified anew by the murky conception of some hideous network of duplicity and crime, with its meshes about her, vouchsafed to her vividly working mind.

She must save herself, she realized, or the blackest of fates would doubtless be her portion. Alone with the silence and the sodden woman, laboring in her sleep, she stood undecided, overwhelmed for a moment with a half-clear glimpse into things appallingly obscure. Doubts as to where she really was assailed her, together with consuming fear of the creatures heard at times below.

But to leave this house without the slightest unnecessary delay was the first demand of action. Quietly, furtively, she glided toward the bed, catching up the iron chain that bound her like a slave. Her hand ran past the wire link, in her trembling anxiety for haste. Then she found it and, moving it to the metal edge employed in the afternoon, bent the twisted strands upon it and began to force them down and up by the feeble glow of the lamp.

It seemed as if they would never snap, so tough was their substance, so soft her hands, and so great was her fear of creating a noise that would rouse Zagorsky from her sleep. In feverish desperation she strained at the wire, and was torn through the skin of her finger. Her hand was presently reddened from the wound; but she worked more hotly than before. The wire gave way!

Excitedly assailing the bright tipped strand, she pushed it and drove it back through the link that it coupled to a mate, finding it harsh and resisting to her efforts. Her hands were stabbed and cut anew; but

the loosened ends were forced to yield, till presently the chain was parted and an end fell down and struck the floor sharply.

Thurley could have moaned. Zagorsky started in her slumber, some of her stubborn instincts of suspicion and watchfulness responding automatically to the noise the chain had made.

## CHAPTER XXXIX

### A DESPERATE FLIGHT

SCARCELY daring to breathe, facing the door with dilated eyes, and expecting an almost immediate demand for admission to the room by some of the men, Thurlley stood holding one end of the chain like a goddess released from bondage. She was almost prepared for a fight for her life, had the moment demanded a fierce and desperate stand.

But nothing happened. Her color, having fled, crept back once more, as her fever and hope burned anew. She was free in part; she must take advantage of her moment.

The window was her only concern. To attempt escape by the stairs and door was a thought far too frightening for a moment's entertainment. She was certain that some, if not all of the men, were below in their usual quarters.

The room afforded nothing in the nature of a rope. She knew from her former examination that the window was far too high from the frozen ground and snow for a leap, or even a drop. She had heard of captives tearing the sheets of a bed to form an escaping strand.

Wrapping half of the chain about her waist and securing the end with the wire, she tumbled the bed clothes over wildly, to find there were no sheets. She remembered the fact, for a moment forgotten in excite-

ment. But two of the blankets were old. She dragged them out and attempted to part them with her hands. The hems at the ends resisted stubbornly. She bit at and tore them with her teeth. Once they were severed, she made headway faster, using jaws and hands together. The blankets were torn into three strips each; then she knotted their ends together.

Zagorsky stirred and partially rose, goaded by some latent force that frequently possessed her in her sleep, rousing her even to walking. "Pelevin!" she said, apparently staring at Thurley.

In sickening fright the girl let fall her strips of cloth, as the woman sank back in her bed.

Cold moisture broke on Thurley's brow. Her heart throbbed like an engine in her breast. It seemed as if the horrid inefficiency of a nightmare numbed and paralyzed her actions. Yet she soon resumed her task. Fear had electrified her ingenuity, as courage had steeled her nerves.

She tied her "rope" to the table leg that was nearest the window, at last, and slightly raised the sash, to drop the end. The window came down again immediately, its loose old skeleton rattling in the frame. Once more its noise awoke the peal of alarms in Thurley's bosom. A gush of the wintry air, sweeping in, had struck like a zone of chill across her heated body.

She glanced about, aware she should need protection from the night and its wind and snow. The gray old cloak was on the bed. She caught it up and put it on, when a crack and a thump on the stairs below made her gasp and start with dread.

She stood there trembling, suppressing her breath, and pressing both hands above her heart as if to stifle

its clamor. Again all was still. She thought of the lamp, and blew it out as a measure of precaution. Groping her way to the window again, she thrust aside the curtains, raised the sash, and put out her foot to crawl out backward, her one hand closed in frantic grip upon her strand of wool.

A horrible voice abruptly broke the silence—Zagorsky talking in her unsundered restlessness of spirit.

"You, Jan, shall strike the blow!" A fearful gurgle spluttered in her throat. She rose from the bed, as Thurley could hear, and floundered about the room.

Unable to endure the frightening thoughts that suddenly swooped upon her, Thurley supported the sash on her shoulder, dropped backward from the sill, and was suddenly out in the clean-smelling cold, swaying twenty feet up from the ground.

The window had closed behind her, falling with its rattle to the cushion of wool where the blanket lay across the frame. Down, down slipped Thurley, nearly thrust from her hold when a knot in the strand was encountered. Her hands were all but scorched by the "rope" as the last few feet slid through her tender palms, then she landed on and fell to the earth.

Up in an instant, unhurt and remarkably revived in strength and nerve by the tonic of the air, she paused for a moment to glance about and listen, before she moved.

The entire side of the building was dark. Not a gleam of light was revealed from a single window. There was not a sound in all the world, it seemed, nor a sign of other houses. A few stars gleamed in wells of vast profundity, between huge masses of cloud. The

great brazen dipper blazed heatlessly, as it swung about the Polar star, immovably studded in the north.

It seemed to Thurley like a guidance divine as she recognized this mighty constellation. It told her the way to go. The village of North Winog, she thought, must be barely a mile to the west. She did not know the abandoned mill was not this structure she was quitting, but was miles away in the opposite direction. Raising the cloak which would have dragged and caught under her feet, she faced the wind that had blown all day across the wintry continent, and was presently plunging through dry drifts of snow and over barren earth, too hard to receive her tracks. The wind sent scud where the drifts were piled, and this filled in the imprints of her shoes, and so concealed her trail.

She glanced behind, as she hastened on; but neither a shout nor a ray of light did the somber old hovel surrender.

Nevertheless, she felt pursued, a haunting sense of her insecurity peopling every shadow with a sinister form, about to leap out and retake her. She presently ran, as increasing distance from the house made the echo of footsteps far too faint to travel back and betray the fact that she was gone.

She came to a fence and clambered through, tearing the cloak, which she held as close as possible about her chest, where the wind sought the thinness of her garments. For the very first time since the moment of entering Edith's room, she missed her furs, her muff and scarf, which Zagorsky must have taken.

They did not matter. Nothing mattered now but escape, to achieve the village and beg for protection

and shelter from the first warm home she should find. Running and walking, feverishly pushing forward, she took no heed of distance or the roughness of the field where she was traveling. She felt a glow of warmth and life responding to her rapid locomotion. And at last she came upon a road.

It led apparently westward; doubtless, she thought, to the village she was seeking. Perhaps North Winog was now no more than half a mile away — and still no sign of pursuers in the rear.

It was a strange still world of gray and black, with skeleton trees against the restless sky, and huge abysses of shadow in the far-off woods, and lakes of dull snow in the meadows. It was frozen to lifelessness, stilled to the silence of death.

Thurley went on. It seemed endless, this road, and its course was altered, at a curve here and there, till directions were all confused. Dark clouds had blotted out the stars, and from time to time a flurry of snow was driven fiercely earthward on the wind.

Thurley was certain she had come a mile at the end of half an hour of ceaseless hurry. She had gone more nearly two — and by then was six from the nearest town and leaving it farther behind. She had nothing by way of plan, save to go and go till she came to North Winog. She had slowed to a steady, active gait! but doubts were beginning in her mind.

An hour out, she halted, glancing about her in bewilderment, wondering whither she had come. Long before this, as she felt convinced, the village should have been encountered. A realizing sense that she must have chosen the wrong direction came discouragingly upon her.

She dared not return and so approach the house from which she had escaped; she felt a little weariness and a dread of being lost. The chill of the breeze would not permit long halting in the road. She must go, and keep on going, she knew — but where?

“I shall come to something finally,” she told herself in bravery; and onward she trudged as before.

At midnight she was all but exhausted. The chain about her waist was cold and heavy. A new despair was at her heart. To go on all night was hardly possible; to sink by the road, in such a bitter atmosphere, would mean to perish long before dawn. She felt the road must terminate at last at a farm, if nothing more. Anything now as a shelter from the wind would be as a haven of rest. The snow was deeper in the road, and her feet were heavy with its weight and constant retarding.

She went on and on — it seemed to her a time that was never to end. It was nearly one o'clock in the morning, with the wind assuming a colder, brisker search of all the land, when out of the darkness loomed the low, squat form of a shed or outbuilding, standing by the road.

A note of gladness escaped the girl as she prodded her lagging limbs to vigorous effort. She was certain of a house which should be near at hand. And her theory was right. There had been a dwelling, once, at the place, and its ruins were there when she came to the site — the mute, gaunt bones of a structure, consumed in the autumn by fire.

Thurley could have wept, from weariness and disappointment. She stumbled back to the shedlike building, once a blacksmith shop, effected an entrance



where a board was torn away, and, sinking down where a few old shavings had escaped the pencils of snow, flung in at gaping cracks, she sheltered herself as best she might, in a broken box beneath a workman's bench — and was thankful to God for rest.

## CHAPTER XL

### A NIGHT OF TOIL

ALICE VAN KIRK on Sunday afternoon felt as if the suspense and strain of uncertainty would completely break her down. The morning had been sufficiently insupportable. She had hardly slept all night, and, with Stuyverant reporting no progress after ten o'clock, her cup of anguish had seemed full to overflowing. But the afternoon, as mockingly barren of news or hope as any hours already endured, brought calls and callers innumerable, with inquiries as to Thurley's health, invitations for the week forthcoming, and astonishment and curiosity on the part of those who discovered by personal attendance at the mansion that Thurley was away.

Alice had not revealed the truth to anyone save Robley and the Baron. She feared and dreaded the rumors and gossip, the exaggerated tales, and the inescapable suspicions that knowledge of the "Princess'" disappearance would immediately engender. Nevertheless to maintain a smiling composure and to parry insidious queries was taxing the utmost of her ingenuity and all but driving her distracted.

Major Phipps, who had been away, recuperating from his literary labors for several weeks, was one of the callers. He came with Kelsey Woods, and was annoyingly insistent in his probing as to Thurley, her whereabouts and prospects. Willie Stetson, with

twenty different bunches of flowers for Thurley to accept or reject, but to exercise her wholly untrammelled choice upon, was early on the scene. Algy Dearborn brought a brand new limerick. Captain Fowler and Beau Brymmer of the Diplomatic service arrived almost together.

Lady Honore Calthorp and Count Fiaschi came together, as they had on a number of occasions. Gailard came later, with floral contributions, and by great good fortune did not collide with the Count.

Fiaschi was sufficiently persistent in his reiterated desire to be made acquainted at once with Thurley's whereabouts. He cornered Alice by herself, at a moment when the others were engaged in a mild debate on woman suffrage, and repeated his wishes anew.

"It is not that I shall be considered as one of the limpid others," he explained. "My nature is one of fire and action — ah! so impatient to move, to surround! Miss Thurley herself understands. She would wish it for me to be informed where she is, what she does away from her home, where I shall send my eager thoughts to remind her of the pleasant times whenever we have met!"

"I quite understand," said Alice, distraught by her haunting fears. "If I were to tell you, Count Fiaschi, that she is far away and in peril, what would your fire and action do?"

He grinned. "I should be aware, dear lady, that you are a humorous people, you Americans. I shall wait. She must presently return. My longing shall bring her back!"

"Perhaps," said Alice; "but I would pray God to send her a humorous American man with a good

strong arm and fearless heart — no hothouse absent treatment!" She rose and joined the others restlessly, her feeling one of negative guilt, that she talked and smiled with guests like these and did nothing at all for Thurley.

She was glad when they went, particularly glad to be rid of the glib Fiaschi — shamelessly boasting of the heat of his heart that she knew to be colder than brass.

But if the Count was insistent, Gaillard was fairly intolerable. The man was at the brink of ruin. His nerves were as brittle as glass. He was pale, irritable, strung taut as a rope between two twisting screws. Fiaschi had crowded him fairly to the edge — and he felt already that the slightest push must hurl him downward to the pit.

Someway, in his desperate plight, he felt the necessity for Thurley Ruxton, a someone of the other days, to whom to open the gates of his soul and relieve the pressure within. She had not replied to his letter, that note amounting to a curt demand that she permit him to announce their engagement. Irrationally he told himself that if she had only sent him word, definite word, even a negative reply, the entire fabric of his luck must have undergone a transformation.

He was not prepared to accept her no for his answer. To-day, however, it was anything to find her, and perhaps compel her to consent to be his wife. He felt it would conquer Fiaschi. To discover that she was absent from the scene, and to receive no adequate explanation of what her absence meant, increased his annoyance and impatience.

"See here!" he said to Alice, in his domineering way,

the moment he could snatch her away from the others. "We both understand that my position with Thurley is unlike that of anyone else. I've a right to know where she's gone."

Alice was nettled. "I wish it were such a right as might keep you better informed, more vitally in touch with events, and then perhaps you might assist instead of goading me."

"What do you mean?" he demanded. "You're not declaring your ignorance as to where she is?"

"And if I were, what then?"

He narrowed his gaze upon her, countless suspicions flashing briefly in his brain. "You're sure she hasn't gone to New Haven?" he said. "It isn't some attempt to erase all final traces of the past?"

Alice could almost have slapped him. "Her past with you?" she queried, as she had on a previous occasion. "I am sure there is no occasion — Mr. Gaillard, if, as you say, you occupy a peculiar position with regard to Thurley, what would you think your duty, should anything arise to menace her happiness, her freedom, her life?"

She had masked her intensity of feeling, or, if she had not, Gaillard failed to penetrate her thin veneer of calm. He smiled again, in his mirthless, sardonic manner, the manner of one desperate, no matter where he turns.

"Is this some trap for me?" he inquired. "Does it snap, upon my answer?"

"It does, to some extent, though my question was not intended as a trap — precisely."

"May I exercise the privilege of avoiding the trap?"

"You may think the trap avoided."

He ceased to smile. "I suppose you mean I am trapped, no matter how I answer?"

Alice shrugged her shoulders. "Your fate is of your own making, not of mine. Suppose Thurley needed help? You claim you occupy a special position in her destiny. How far would you be willing to go, what would you sacrifice to find her and give her assistance?"

Gaillard wondered if perchance the game was over and Thurley sent away; whether Alice Van Kirk had begun to fear detection of their game and had brought it to a sudden termination. His attitude was altered by the thought, so lightly did his weather vane respond to a zephyr of change.

"If she's out of town," he replied, "I'd do what I could; do anything in reason except, of course, to leave the city just at present. God knows my whole career may depend on my being here now every minute!"

"Exactly," said Alice, and that was her final word with the man, but not her final disgust.

She sounded nearly every man who had hung on Thurley's words and moves, while flowers and speeches were the price. There was none in them all, she felt convinced, with the manhood, the courage, and the self denial to risk his comfort, far less risk his life, should the "Princess" require such sacrifice to defend her, perhaps from death.

In the final analysis not a few regarded Thurley as already the prize, and therefore the charge, of the young Grand Duke Karl-Wilhelm. They would gladly flirt with his affianced bride; but her dangers were all for him.

It was late when Stuyverant 'phoned at last that a

faint star of hope had risen. His message was brief and excited, the merest statement that a hint had arrived at the Baron's headquarters and that anything further that might develop would be 'phoned in later on. He was going, Robley added, to a place far out from Manhattan, to investigate a vague report that might prove utterly groundless. It was something at least on which to act, and midnight would tell the tale.

To all of Alice's eager questions he returned the vaguest of answers, presently hanging up the 'phone. If disappointment lurked beyond, he preferred to accept its brunt himself and not raise beaming expectations, to dash them later in the night.

It was late when he started in his car, with his man in the driver's seat. He had ascertained that no railroad trains ran nearer than fifteen miles or more to the west of North Winog. He was dressed in furs which differed but slightly from those of his mechanician. Wolfskin robes were heaped in the tonneau's hold, should occasion arise for their use.

Their lamps were lighted on the ferryboat. Half an hour later, with nearly four clear hours ahead of them in which to cover a distance calculated at something under seventy miles, the car was going like a huge projectile over roads hard as flint.

The darkness descended swiftly. The night was moonless; but the film of snow that lay on all that lifeless world reflected the dim refulgence of the heavens, clearly defining the pike. For more than a quarter of the distance the big dark device of modern power and velocity shot through villages, past fields, and over bridges like a thing made glad by its own sheer might

and perfection. Then, it blew out a tire, and a long, heart racking siege of disasters had been ushered in, as if at the beckoning of Fate.

A cylinder began to miss, almost upon the resumption of the journey. For fully an hour both Stuyverant and his man sought vainly to locate the trouble. When they came upon it finally they found it somewhat serious, a valve rod sticking every other minute, and then for a time running normally. Filing and oiling aided materially; but the lost minutes were totaling fast.

When once he could drive ahead again, the chauffeur urged such terrific speed that wreckage was constantly threatened. One violent maneuver resulting from this recklessness stripped out the gears of the intermediate speed. A battery connection, shaken loose, brought on a recurrence of the missing — for which the valve rod was for long mistakenly attacked.

One crushing, delaying complication after another arose. The great machine, now racing, now barely toiling in the highway, performed every known depravity of steel and spark and gasoline. Another tire went the way of ruin. Impatiently, wildly, Stuyverant strove to redeem lost time; but in vain. It was one interminable series of delays, repairs, and exhausting efforts to keep the machine on its legs.

Eight o'clock found them far from anywhere, with forty miles to go. Calamity overtook them almost while they reckoned that, with luck, they would still be late no more than half an hour.

At nine they were down and out again, Stuyverant groaning in vain. He had looked at his watch a hundred times, and now, with more than thirty miles to travel, was sweating in the frozen wind, to think of



what might be happening where Thurley waited, peering through the night for the help that could not arrive.

How they limped along toward North Winog, Robley could never have told. It seemed a veritable nightmare of helplessness, wherein he struggled furiously to get ahead, only to be baffled, hindered, stalled, by things intangible that may not be engaged and overcome.

It was midnight and past when they came at last to the village. They had gone astray from the road, among their other accidents, and expended an hour getting back. The little settlement in which they found themselves at last seemed part of the frozen world. Not a light was shown from any house, where all appeared like spectral things, merely mockeries of men's abodes, with glassy eyes lifelessly staring.

Leaving his man in charge of the car, Stuyverant hastened off at once to find the abandoned mill. He came there at last, discovering an empty old ruin through which the wind was howling dismally. Armed as he was, he nevertheless approached it with caution, only to ascertain that a burial place would exhibit more cheer and life.

He knew that if Thurley had been here at all she had long since gone away. Bitterness, self accusation, and impotent bickerings at fates and accidents consumed him there in the wind. It seemed so utterly puerile to have come for this, and be obliged to turn about and return the way he had traveled, crowned with defeat and disappointment.

There was nothing about the structure to give him the slightest guidance, or a hint as to what he should do. He could only turn disgustedly away, reviling

himself for failure in Thurley's hour of need, and face the cold and desolation between himself and his car.

Harassed, even tortured by worry and apprehension as to what his delinquency might have involved, he could only wonder vaguely how possible to serve the "Princess" now. He could think of one thing only — remain for the night at North Winog and by search and inquiry, early in the morning, redeem a little of his effort.

He came to the village street some distance from his car. Up the road he went, as rapidly as possible, wondering soon if his man had curled himself down in the furs to keep himself warm as he waited. He had rather expected the man to be walking about in the road, warming himself by motion.

"Banks!" he called, as he came in speaking distance; but no reply was returned.

He came to the car, glanced in at the tonneau, discovered it empty of anything save the furs, and was passing along to the front of the hood when he all but fell over his man.

He was lying loosely crumpled in the road, his hat a little thrown aside, his face marble white on the snow.

"Banks!" cried Stuyverant, kneeling down; but the man, unconscious, left there for dead by Pelevin and Max, returning from their long cold wait at the mill, neither heard nor felt nor moved.

## CHAPTER XLI

### THE GOLD OF MORNING

It was not till an hour afterward, with the village astir and the neighborhood agog, that Stuyverant paused for a moment to wonder why his chauffeur had been attacked. He was unaware that Banks, in the night's dim starlight, resembled the Grand Duke Karl somewhat strikingly.

The task of dragging and carrying Banks to a house, arousing the inmates, and inducing the frightened men and hysterical women of the immediate vicinity to help him save his mechanician's life, had occupied all his strength and thought.

Underlying all of this was a dull but throbbing consciousness that Thurley was somewhere, near or far, disappointed, — if alive, — and doubtless in the hands of assassins allied with those who must have beaten Banks. It was never possible, for even the part of a second, to forget that the "Princess" had called him, sent him her brief appeal, expected him here, or somewhere, at the fateful hour of nine.

He felt that now, in the hours left of a long disastrous night, he should be in his car, driving hither and yon — moving — moving — doing something definite — something to find her and help her! He groaned at the necessity of serving Banks, while neglecting Thurley, though the loyal impulse of his nature urged him readily to give all he could to his man.

Banks had sustained a frightful blow on the skull. That the arch of bone had not been more severely fractured or even crumpled inward was a miracle, due perhaps to the thickness of his hair. He had not revived till nearly three in the morning, and then for a moment only. A local physician, summoned tardily, had exhausted himself and his resources early, while the ministrations of the women served to better purpose.

It was daylight, and Stuyverant was still tirelessly assisting and directing operations, when his man at length gave assurance of assuming his normal functioning, so suddenly interrupted and so near its termination. The man, however, would be too ill and weak to be moved for several days. The name of a skillful woman nurse was supplied, in answer to Stuyverant's demands. She lived in a larger village twenty miles away, whither no one could go in a hurry. There was no alternative, as Robley knew — he must go in his car, and drive the machine himself.

He drank three steaming cups of coffee, thoughtfully provided by the one calm woman of the house, and started on his way.

The sun arose in clouds and blue together, its first frost brightened rays appearing to press upon the earth a colder wave of air. Far off on a lonesome, snow-strewn road, Thurley had meantime roused from an inactivity which could scarcely be described as sleep. She had shivered and chattered all night in her box, drawing shavings and her tattered cloak about her chilling limbs and shoulders, and had risen at times to beat her hands, tramp up and down the shop, and otherwise struggle with the numbing cold that crept to the marrow of her bones.

The first faint streaks of dawn had readily addressed her senses, alert for signs that the night was passed, since its darkness and drag had seemed to be centuries long. She had slipped from the shedlike structure, only to find the half-dim world a scene of chill and desolation. The wind had sought her instantly, as if in greed for a victim long denied. To face the road thus early was utterly disheartening. She was not even sure of the way she had come. Back to the darkness of the partly sheltered shop she hastened, to hunt in vain for a match, whereby a fire might be lighted in the forge.

When at last the sun put a finger through a crack — a slender, golden finger, cold but comforting, smoldering hope took flame again in the heart of the weary girl. Her courage was endless. She felt that if only she could find a house, with any sort of welcome, in a space of twenty miles, she would walk and make no complaint.

No sooner had she issued forth, however, and ascertained her right direction by sight of the fire-ruined house, than all the old fears of the previous night, plus a hundred more, returned to reignite her fever. The darkness, after all, had been her friend. By the morning's light those terrible men and the frightful woman at the house she had quitted would soon be infesting every road. They could not long remain in ignorance of her escape, if they had not, indeed, discovered her absence early in the night.

It seemed almost as if perhaps her greater safety lay in remaining at the shop. Yet there they might also presently search; and there she could starve, or perish with cold, before she might perchance be enabled to hail

some passing vehicle and beg for aid and protection. And how should she know from whom to implore assistance, since of all the men she had heard at the house she had seen but one, Pelevin?

She knew she must simply hasten on, as fast as stiffened, aching limbs could carry her down the road. If only the chain about her waist could be dropped, she should feel such tremendous relief! She was powerless, however, to remove it, and breathlessly expectant that any moment she might be startled by a shout, as pursuing men espied and bore down upon her, she faced the bleakness of the lifeless road and trudged bravely onward as before.

She had certainly gone far less than a mile, and was coming to a wooden bridge that spanned a black little stream, when out of the crispness of the morning air came a series of sharp percussions.

She knew them at once, the rapid fire discharges of a motor car with the muffler cutout open. Her heart leaped like a doe discovered by a hunter. The car was somewhere down ahead, but was not in sight, where the road was curved in the woods. Instinctively certain that pursuit alone could arouse men at sunrise, she darted swiftly to the bridge, leaped down a frozen bank of gravel, and was presently crouching in the shadows by the stream, holding her breath to still her heart, which she felt must betray her with its beating.

She had not long to wait. The car thus early disturbing the silence sped with a snarl of power to the bridge and over its planks, rattling down dust and bits of snow on the girl as gray as her cloak.

It was gone as quickly, its two eager occupants, Max and Jan, wildly searching road, copse, and field

as they rounded the circle back to the house from which their intended victim had escaped.

They had made their discovery shortly after two in the morning. Returning from their wait at the mill and their murderous assault, made upon Banks, who had been discovered too late to be another person than the young Grand Duke, they had striven in vain to arouse Zagorsky, till the door had been forced and the truth abruptly discovered.

At daylight the search on foot had begun, then the car brought into requisition. They had taken a road where some tracks in the snow had been left undisturbed by the wind. The tracks were not Thurley's. Now their circle brought them back again, calculations convincing both the men that their captive could scarcely have gone so far, even by walking all night.

When they came to the oldtime blacksmith shop, they halted and broke in the door.

Thurley, meantime, not having dared attempt a look when the car was passing, remained in her place of concealment till the faintest sound had died away in the distance. When she emerged, to clamber once more to the frozen road and hasten on more feverishly than before, she was suddenly afflicted by a second thought which made her sick with disappointment.

It might have been Robley in his car from whom she had hidden at the bridge! He might have received her note at last, and have come as soon as possible, arriving only at dawn! It was highly improbable, after all, that creatures such as she had seen at the house of her imprisonment would employ an automobile.

She could almost have cried, she could almost have turned and run where the car had disappeared; but the

thought of proceeding in that direction was intensely frightening; she could only plod ahead.

How far she had trudged when once again she heard the lively puncturing of the air by a motor's exhaust, Thurley neither knew nor cared. She was once more possessed by alarms and excitements, the instincts of precaution, the hope of deliverance and friends.

The car she heard was behind her. It was not yet to be seen, so winding was the road. She had halted opposite a more than usually desolate area, where trees had been cut, earth hauled away, and stumps left strewn in dismal neglect. She darted to the cover that the nearest one afforded, and concealed herself behind its blackened bulk.

The car was coming rapidly, still hidden by the earthy bank where excavations had ceased. It slowed to take a furrowed bit of road, its muffler purring quietly, then rolled into view with the sunlight gleaming from its brass.

"Robley!" cried Thurley, leaping to her feet, and stumbling and pitching grotesquely, to catch her balance where a frozen clod had caught her foot, she saw the startled, whitened face of Stuyverant turned upon her and felt as if her very soul must leap from her bosom in joy.

He had halted his car as if it had struck a wall. He leaped from his seat as he had that day when he fell, and ran to catch her in his arms, as she lunged once more to fall from weakness and the stiffness of her body.

"Thurley!" he said. "Thurley! In God's name how —"

"Oh, get me away! Don't stop!" she interrupted



wildly, clinging to him helplessly. "I've walked so far — and they may be coming any minute! Oh, you've come — you've come! I don't see how you ever found me! But please don't wait — don't talk! Let's go — just as fast as ever we can!"

"But Thurley — who — Let me help you in," he said to her, leading her promptly round the car, where she climbed to the seat beside his own. "There's no one on the road. You're cold! Good heavens, what you must have been through! You must take these robes. Perhaps you'd better ride in the back. Which way do you wish me to go?"

So many words, explanations, and questions were on his mind that he abandoned coherence in despair. And Thurley, weakened by sudden relief and reliance on his strength, could only sink in the cushioned seat, muffled with furs, and reply in broken sentences.

"I'd rather ride here. Oh, to see you — anyone — after it all! The horrible dream! But they'll come — they'll come! Just straight ahead — anywhere but back that other way — somewhere to get a train or reach a house and demand protection! They'd stop at nothing now! Just please make it go!"

The car started slowly down the road.

"You're safe," he assured her, gaining in calm as her weakness increased upon her and the need for his strength arose. "You're excited, Thurley — naturally. God! to think —"

"What's that?" she interrupted wildly, her eyes tremendously dilated and blazing in his own.

"What's what? I —"

"It's another car! Oh, if it should be —"

She had turned to look backward on the highway.

Suddenly round the turn shot a big red limousine, two men on the seat in front.

One of the men half rose by the wheel and let out a yell like a fiend.

Stuyverant's car had already responded to his urging of spark and throttle. He felt Thurley slump in sickening fear, and understood the situation as no spoken word could have told him.

He crowded on his utmost power, the monster beneath him lurched forward like a liberated locomotive, and a furious race began.

## CHAPTER XLII

### THE RACE

THERE was certainly less than three hundred yards between the cars when Jan and Max, who had turned, five miles back, on suspicion, to pursue the Stuyverant machine, were obliged to slow for the briefest period, where the ruts would have wrecked their motor.

Stuyverant, glancing back at them quickly, was confident of winning, should his car behave its best; but his face was grim.

"These men have no right — wouldn't dare —" he started to cry; but he realized they would halt at nothing, as a vivid conviction was flashed on his brain that doubtless they had struck the blow that had all but killed his man.

"We're gaining!" cried Thurley, her strength and courage reasserting themselves with wonderful resilience. "Can you give her any more?"

For his answer Stuyverant jammed the muffler cutout with his heel. A terrific series of detonations instantly followed. The car plunged forward with newer zest and trees shot past in a blur.

In the moment's advantage, caused by the ruts that held the pursuing monster at the rear, they nearly doubled their lead. Then on came the giant limousine like the fragment of a meteor ripping up the road.

It was Jan driving, his rage prodigious, his lust for murder now a mania, broken from its bonds. The car was one of enormous power, a racing model, equipped

with the limousine for winter use, and but little hindered by this bulky superstructure. Its six big cylinders were pouring might and a gatling fusillade upon the road. It roared like an engine of doom and destruction, hurtling and rocketing to overtake the fleeing machine ahead.

Stuyverant's car was low to the ground, like a greyhound eager for work. For some inexplicable reason the motor, that had balked in the night, was running like a dream, its mighty pistons hurtling a cataract of power upon the shaft and wheels. Despite the superior dynamic of the car behind, it continued to creep away.

Snow, frozen dust, and a stifling cloud of fumes seemed scorched from Stuyverant's path when he leaned a little forward and gave more oil to the swiftly heating motor. Din, crazy speed, and appalling velocity marked the course where the huge devices raced.

A knife-edge wind seemed hurling down upon Thurley, as they split the frozen air. The road became a torrent, rushing incredibly under their wheels, its gray and snow white blended in a froth. They swung about an angle in the highway, out upon a wider pike, which led straightaway to a village, small in size.

For one brief second Stuyverant dreamed that to halt in the town and demand protection might be advisable; but he almost as quickly abandoned the thought as an invitation to death. Not only was the settlement insignificant, and the hour too early for its officers to be astir in the street, but the fiery projectile behind, belching red flame and scorching the very snow from its path, was heating to new efficiency and making perceptible gains.

There was nothing on earth that Robley could do by way of giving more power to his car or heaving out freight to make it lighter. He could only attempt to hold his lead by absolutely reckless driving, hoping that some deserved catastrophe might overtake the minotaur of evil there behind.

They shot through the village like a fury of battle hurled by a monstrous hurricane, frightful echoes of their gatling fire thundering back from the houses.

A sharp staccato, like a pistol shot, in the uproar of red-hot exhausts, pierced through the roaring of the car behind and told of a "miss" in one of her six great cylinders.

Two men and a dog had spun dizzily past, the sole signs of life in the place.

Again that barking explosion came, and Stuyverant's heart and his stampeding car leaped like animals together. He knew his pursuers were in trouble.

By yards and rods the limousine was falling to the rear. Lamed by the one balking cylinder, now running, now dead for a second or less, it relinquished speed like a Marathon runner facing a hill on the final lap of his race.

A gap of nearly a mile's extent was swiftly opened between the two, as Stuyverant held to his speed. Exultation, burning in his pulses, flaring in his motor, and roaring in his wake, made hot his frame, despite the biting wind, and brightened his eyes with triumph.

He shot to the cover of a stretch of woods, where the road wound westward like a river. A crack like a rifle's incisive note rang out on the air, and his car swerved wildly from the road.

A tire had gone from the right fore wheel, and a

spring was snapped as he wrenched her back and saved them from destruction.

It was madness to drive at speed after that, and he groaned as he slowed her to reason.

He had to keep on, despite his flattened casing. And his wrist all but failed as he clung to the wheel, holding the cripple from plunging away on a tangent of death for them both.

Almost simultaneously with the accident, the air startling roar of the huge six-cylinder came vibrantly and clearly on the wind. It was back in tune, with no more missing to cut its power down.

"They'll catch us, Thurley!" he called to the girl. "We're done for now on speed."

She knew precisely what had happened. She knew how utterly mad it would be to race with a flattened front tire. On this rutted road it was not to be attempted for a moment. It would be fairly suicidal.

She could think of nothing to say and Stuyverant shouted, "What shall we do?"

The car was still racing, but slowly now, her speed perhaps sufficient to elude the pursuers for five or six minutes or more.

"We couldn't hide?" cried Thurley, and Stuyverant glanced at the woods.

"There's just one chance," he called above the din, releasing the muffler cut-out for the purpose. "Give me your cloak. You take my cap and furs. I'll get out and run, so the devils can see me — and you drive on. They'll think it is I still driving, and you are running to hide. Slip off your cloak and be quick." He halted the car as he spoke.

"But oh, if anything —" Thurley started, when he interrupted quickly.

"No time to talk or argue. It's the only chance. Your cloak!"

He had dropped off his great fur coat and clapped his cap upon her head. She rose and he stripped her of the old gray garment, helping her swiftly into the furs and urging her into his seat.


"If they catch you, Robley —" she started as before. "I mustn't let —"

"I love you!" he said, in the stress and white heat of the moment. "I'd give my life to serve you! Quick — there isn't a moment to lose! Open her up as wide as you dare to drive, and don't stop for anything on earth!" He leaped from the car and started for the woods, covered from heels to crown by the long gray cloak that Thurley had trailed in the night. "Good by!" he called. "Don't wait! Don't wait! They're nearly in sight up the road!"

"Good by!" she replied, the tears swiftly springing in her softened eyes, and, starting the car with her firm, young skill, reinforced by the courage demanded by the moment, she was going again at dizzying speed when the huge limousine, belching and roaring with malevolence and blood lust, shot into view around the bend, and Stuyverant ran to a bit of brush and crouched as if to hide.

One yell of satisfaction, barely audible to Robley, ascended from the pursuing car and informed him he had been seen.

Almost at once the detonations of the limousine ceased. The car was halted; for the roadway bent a trifle, and the way to the woods was shorter from here than from where the fugitive had started.



Both men leaped from the heated monster and started across the snow and broken ground, rapidly approaching the spot where Stuyverant was hiding. He leaped to his feet and, through dry weeds, ran as if staggering with terror.

One man fell, but rose again, cursing the root that had thrown him down and drawing his knife as he once more darted forward. It was Jan, and he quickly overtook his less fiendish comrade, with the quarry now nearly in his grasp.

Stuyverant felt for his pistol — and nearly collapsed with a sudden memory he had left it in the car. For a moment he nearly went wild with disappointment, then adopted a desperate plan. Nothing but quickness and the great advantage of surprise could avail to save him now, and this he knew.

He seemed to struggle on. When out of the corner of his eye he could see his pursuer's shadow, and in his ear caught the puff and snort of the fellow's breathing, he suddenly halted, turned like a flash, and struck the man with all his might, fairly in the pit of the stomach.

Down he went like a stricken bullock, doubled with agony, to writhe on the earth in pain and loss of breath.

Leaping fairly across his helpless form, Stuyverant met the German, Max, with an equally unexpected and unparried blow, on the point of the chin, and saw him quiver where he fell.

It was all accomplished in the briefest span, a matter made comparatively easy by the wholly unlooked for method of attack.

Panting and white, with rage and his effort, Robley regarded the first of the two with eyes that gleamed like steel. The creature was helpless, rolling his eyes in an anguish that did not subside.



"You curs!" said Stuyverant, taking up the knife that Jan had let fall from his hand, and, starting at once to make further pursuit impossible, he ran and walked to their waiting car and clambered to the seat.

For the first time then, as he made an attempt to grip the wheel with his hand, he realized that his wrist was gone, from the blows he had just delivered. In its mending condition it had been too weak to sustain the force of the shock. It was useless, though not again broken.

He had hoped to take the limousine and continue after Thurley. Such a course was out of the question. But to wreck the car was well within his power. He made ready to leap, slipped in the clutch, speeded up as much as he dared, then, pushing the spark and throttle forward, jumped out at the side, and permitted the erstwhile roaring monster to rush unguided down the road.

For a moment it clung to the straight bit of road like a thing endowed with life; then, gathering speed, and lunging forward like a maddened animal, it suddenly veered at the highway's curve and plunged with violence incredible down through a glade of the snow and ice, ramming a tree with an impact tremendous to behold.

There was a crash of shattered glass, fierce grinding sounds, the crunching of iron, and turmoil of twisting steel, and its wreckage and ruin were complete.

Stuyverant started down the road where Thurley had gone, on foot. There was nothing else to do, no other place to go. He merely wondered how far she might have sped, how far he must walk to come to a village and

get a train at last — perhaps with the “Princess,” and perhaps alone.

He glanced back repeatedly, until at length he came to a turn of the highway, beyond which was an opening through the woods affording a view of all the open space where he had met his murderous assailants. Until the place was hidden from his view, he saw no sign that either man had risen from the earth.

He was going rapidly, merely intent upon making all possible progress, and inclined to believe that Thurley might attempt to secure assistance beyond and return again to the scene, when he was thoroughly astounded to discover his car, standing unattended in the road, some distance ahead, a bit of bluish mist between the wheels revealing the fact that the motor was in motion.

He hastened his pace, alarmed anew as he saw no sign of Thurley. Then he came to the side of the trembling machine and glanced hurriedly about. Thurley had disappeared.

For a moment possessed with the wildest beliefs that some new calamity met in this direction had accomplished her destruction after all, he ran ahead, came back, called out her name, and searched all the wooded copse with a quickly roving gaze.

Not a ruffling nor a track did the snow in that direction afford. On the road's other side the wind had cleared the frozen earth, making footprints out of the question. But he hastened there, and beheld in the field quite a distance away something furry that lay in the snow.

It was Thurley. When she drove away and left the scene where Stuyverant, running and hiding, was inviting perhaps even death to overtake him, she had al-

most immediately suffered a sense of selfishness in attempting to escape, while abandoning the man she knew she dearly loved.

She had merely obeyed instructions hurriedly supplied. Then the limping car, bumping stiffly over frozen ruts, had presently added an element unforeseen. The seat cushion next to the one she occupied was jolted from its place. In a shallow receptacle where it had been placed lay Stuyverant's revolver.

The car had arrived at the turn of the road affording a second view of the field where Stuyverant was running. As Thurley looked she beheld a man go down in a sudden encounter. She was certain it was Robley, viciously attacked by the creatures at his heels.

She had halted the car, snatched up the revolver, and run with all her might toward the place half seen beyond. Then her foot struck a root, she plunged headforemost on the earth, the pistol was discharged, and she lay there, motionless and white.

## CHAPTER XLIII

### A JOY RESISTED

STUYVERANT came running to the place, the gravest fears overwhelming his sense of reflection. One impression only was his mind prepared to accept — a second foe had accomplished what the others had earlier failed to perform! The pistol, gleaming in her hand, sent a newer shock to his heart. He bent down at once and raising Thurley's head, made a quick examination which revealed no sign of a wound. The bullet had done no harm.

Thurley had struck on a frozen clod and the blow had stunned her senses. Stuyverant could not determine, however, the nature or extent of her injuries, and feared they were the worst. His mind was possessed by the thought of menace in all that wintry scene. He felt the most urgent necessity for getting her back to the car and far away without another moment's loss of time.

He attempted to lift her prostrate form; but his wrist was far too weak. He merely succeeded in rolling her over and raising her head to his knee; but that was sufficient.

Thurley returned to consciousness with astonishing celerity, once her position was altered. She opened her eyes and looked at Stuyverant wistfully, as if some fear that she had only dreamed of this deliverance were coloring all her thoughts.

"You're hurt?" he said eagerly. "What happened?"

She could not immediately answer; but she presently said, "I fell. I — was running — to you — with something — with your pistol — that was it." She raised herself abruptly, staring about her with blazing eyes.

"Where are they?" she cried a little weakly. "But how have you — I thought I saw you fall! Oh! let's not wait another minute!"

Her nightmare of fears and horrors had rushed upon her relentlessly with consciousness fully returned. She struggled swiftly to her feet, her aspect one of alarm and apprehensions.

"We're safe — at least from pursuit," he said, glancing far across the field of snow to the place where the nihilists had fallen. "But we'll go at once and try to catch a train."

With the pistol recovered and placed in his pocket, he threw off the cloak that had served them both and, supporting her arm with the hand left uninjured, conducted her back to the car.

"I shall have to ask you to drive," he said, a grim little smile for a second curving his lips. "My hand is down and out again — from my hurry to get it back into use."

Thurley was glad to take the wheel and start the car in motion. "What happened?" she said, still breathlessly excited. "How did you manage to escape? Oh! when I saw them after you I felt the most awful sensations in the world!"

He told her a little of the happenings and of how he had wrecked the car. He placed the furs about them both to protect her from the wind. And at last he smiled again.

"For the third fateful time you drive the car in my place, — as I feared you might; but as neither could have expected."

She looked at him once more in her wistful way, a way that went straight to his heart.

"But you do think this is the last of these frights; that the charm is satisfied?" she asked. "There will be no more like this — with accident — or horror in it all?"

"No more," he answered solemnly. "And yet — each time has drawn us nearer together."

The color burned up in her pallid cheeks superbly — a flash of the Thurley he had known and must love, though time and space and the greater abyss of hopeless separation attempted to dim its flame. Her eyes met his for a wonderful second — and both souls knew the deeps of love wherein they floated alone.

The words he had spoken when they parted in the road — that swift declaration of his loyalty, love, and devotion, echoed anew in her welcoming heart and filled all her pulses with joy. She thrilled to the words he uttered now, his grave recognition that the Fates had drawn their two unwitting selves together, knitting a bond between their deepest spirits with a strength they could not resist.

Yet even here, after all she had recently endured, she could not forget her word to Alice Van Kirk nor fully accept this wondrous happiness, vouchsafed in the wintry desolation.

"We have had some extraordinary experiences together," she answered, smiling faintly. "It makes it seem as if we have known each other always."

Stuyverant had swiftly taken flame. Love bounded

and surged in his veins. He felt that, more than any one living, he had rights in Thurley's life, and happiness, rights that no other could assume.

"We have known each other always," he said, "as two souls must, when Life and Chance — yes, Nature and God — have wrought to fulfill such meetings, destinies, such comradeship, as ours!" He placed his hands on hers that grasped the wheel. "Thurley, I told you, back in the road —"

"Oh, please!" she begged him suddenly, her eyes swiftly brimming with exquisite joy and the need to curb his declaration. "Would you please not tell me anything now — I mean just tell me how you came?"

He felt that he understood, and yet he felt she loved him. Divine conviction of their oneness and their sublimated passion swept like a storm upon his nature, beating against the barrier he had felt and dreaded between them. Constraint, uncertainty, even pain and hurt, were swiftly combined with the truths and necessities that he feared must still hold them apart.

Yet if he somewhat sounded the happiness and heart hunger for his love that throbbed in Thurley's bosom, he also felt convinced of her genuine wish to avoid the tender topic — and there, as in all else where her wishes lay, he was helpless to act in his own behalf, no matter what the penalty.

His disappointment burned in his eyes along with the glow of his love. He could not take advantage of the situation that threw her thus helplessly upon his chivalry, and his heart, protesting, was dumb.

"I came because I could not hesitate," he told her simply; and briefly he recounted all that had happened

to himself, Alice, and the Baron since the moment the abduction was complete.

Thurley broke out from time to time with a note of surprise, sympathy, of indignation, when she learned of Pelevin's entire duplicity. Her worry and compassion had their expression when he told her of the long, hard ride with his man and the unseen attack that had laid his chauffeur on the earth.

"You must send a nurse at once," she declared, when she learned the object of his early morning excursion. "Perhaps you could put me on a train for New York and go back with a nurse in an hour."

"I shall take you home," he answered. "You have told me nothing of all this atrocious business, — how it happened, how you got away."

She related everything, glad to share the horrors of her days and nights with one who would understand. She shuddered anew over all she had endured in those final hours of escape and flight and struggle with the cold. Her hand went out involuntarily, a second, to grasp the sleeve of his coat, so vivid were the moments lived again, in her imagination. A sacred joy leaped exultantly in his heart at the little sign of her confidence; then her hand returned to the wheel again and the duty of guiding the car.

It was still fairly early in the morning, with the sun warmly blazing from a cloudless sky at last, when they came to a city on the railroad and learned that a New York limited was due in twenty minutes. They 'phoned to Alice, devoured a breakfast of rolls and coffee, placed the car in charge of a local garage, and summoned a nurse to go at once to Banks, in North Winog. Then they were speeded home, missing the carriage



Alice had sent to the ferry, where Robley had taken a taxicab at the moment of arriving.

A white and fluttering fairy godmother, the victim of sudden reactions and relaxings of nervous strain, at last clasped Thurley somewhat hysterically to her bosom and cried for the joy she had felt was gone past all recalling. Robley was sent to his physician, for needed attention to his wrist; and the "Princess" was finally sent to bed, where she sank into slumber like a child.

The chapter of violent occurrences was destined to achieve a fitting close. All North Winog, tremendously shaken by the crime committed at their very doors, had aroused like a congress of Sheriffs. At noon, in the old, abandoned house where Thurley had been prisoned, they came upon a dreadful sight, where Jan and Zagorsky, still clutching knives, lay, slain by one another. Pelevin and Max had fled. What duel of words, recriminations, and passions had preceded the deadly combat waged with steel, no witness was ever to reveal. Mute testimony of the fierce and savage conflict between the man and woman was supplied by everything in and about the room where they had fought. And the hatred of man and distrust of their kind, which alone must actuate the fanatical nihilist, was frozen indelibly upon their features as they lay there, stark and cold.

## CHAPTER XLIV

### UNEXPECTED AID

It was fully two days before Thurley and Alice were sufficiently recovered to resume their ways of life. That Thurley was not completely prostrated was solely to the credit of her will, her courage, and her magnificently perfect health.

The news had gone rapidly about the circle that the "Princess" had returned, and for once the daily papers were unaware of the vital facts in the story. No one save Stuyverant, Alice, and the Baron had been authentically informed of what had taken place.

As if all eagerness to regain lost ground and gratify desires and appetites merely whetted by Thurley's absence from the scene, her numerous admiring swains redoubled their former efforts for her favor. Whole shops full of flowers trooped fragrantly in at the mansion's doors, rivaled only by white winged invitations to opera parties, cotillions, dinners, receptions, with which all Swelldom inundated Alice and her protégée.

Baron von Hochhaus, duly informed as to Thurley's safe return, desired to call at the earliest moment rendered possible by grave complications of his business. Count Fiaschi was fired with pent-up ardor which could scarcely wait to be conventional or be restrained for another hour. His insistence, indeed, roused Thurley to

a sense of resentment most diverting from her recent terrifying adventures.

But her one great happiness now was Alice. They two had been knitted to a sweet relationship that was second only to that of mother and daughter. Alice had clung to her just a little wildly, accusing herself of having made the girl's dread experience possible, and declaring her frights, her despair, and her love repeatedly. She had hung upon every word and moment of the narrative, breathless and white with each succeeding anguish that Thurley had endured. And she had since become childishly loath to see her "Princess" depart from her sight for so much as a moment.

This was the partially restored condition of affairs at the great Fifth Avenue palace when Acton Gaillard, driven to final desperation, telephoned to Thurley on Wednesday afternoon for a private interview.

"I have something important to say, to request," he told her, his voice harsh and hoarse on the wire. "It is nothing for myself, but something concerning a certain man who has thrust his attentions upon you — a certain Count. I beg you to let me come."

Thurley had told him to come. He arrived at four, a haggard, nerveless being, as remotely related to the Gaillard she had known as a dried and frozen rill is related to the boisterous and arrogant brook of the spring.

She was shocked at his appearance, unaware either that Fiaschi had driven him finally to the blackest rim of ruin, or that matters of money could so undermine and sap a strong man's strength.

"I haven't much to tell you, after all," he said, with a sickly sort of smile, when the mere conventions of

their meeting had been satisfied; "but I felt I must beg this chance of warning you that Count Fiaschi is an utterly unscrupulous cur, with whom to associate is a degradation. I have known him a year. I have no wish to gabble of his shameless liaisons, his abominable affairs on the Continent, his glaring duplicities, or a score of transactions barely less than crimes; but I couldn't rest till I let you know a little of what he is. I have really come for that — and also to implore you, in the name of everything decent and American, to expel this charlatan, this leech and dog, from your circle."

Thurley, already sufficiently informed as to Count Fiaschi's detestable characteristics, was nevertheless a little curious to know what Gaillard meant and what he might also know. "Your indictment is very positive," she said. "You must be prepared to prove a case against him."

"I could prove a hundred with a little time," answered Gaillard emphatically. "I have made no preparations for any such exposure. It was neither my way nor my duty. He has been my business partner. He has used my confidence for my ruin. He has beaten me, ruined me, working on my business word and honor, all in his effort to thrust me aside from his path to you! It is not for that I am here, however, smirching the man behind his back. I can take my beating, the wreckage, everything, if only I can be assured that through it he shall not triumph here! And understand I have realized at last my own mistakes of the past and the place where I put myself; but I almost feel I could murder this whelp if he also blinded you!"

His emotions were tremendous. They shook him as

if they were the masters. In his pale, livid face only his two eyes seemed alive, burning with the concentrated intensity of all his angered being.

Thurley gazed at him astonished. She had no thought of Fiaschi now as an element of menace in her life; she thought of him only as a monster in whose tentacles the man before her appeared to be strangely helpless. She felt Gaillard's helplessness, his surrender in some mighty struggle, doubtless waged with all his stubborn strength against some unseen treachery he was powerless to meet.

Her resentment against Fiaschi, already vigorous and impatient, was like a mental fulminate, requiring only a spark to flash out a shattering explosion.

"Do you think," she said, with simulated calm she was far from feeling, "that the Count has dealt unfairly with you for the purpose, for any reason at all concerned with me?"

"To put me out of the running!" Gaillard answered hotly. "That's the part I couldn't stand. When a man is my partner and does a thing like that, I'd do almost anything to snatch away the prize he thinks he has won!"

Thurley's eyes blazed and steadied as she looked upon Gaillard's face. "Would you mind just telling me a little of how he has beaten you in business?"

Gaillard failed to understand. He expected that Thurley, at the end, would attempt a defense of the Count. Perhaps for that reason he made more clear, more naked and complete, the revelations hotly poured from his lips. He told of his first discoveries that Fiaschi, supposed to be his friend as well as business associate and partner in their enterprise, had begun to

undermine his credit. He added item after item of the Count's intrigues and hidden maneuvers to compass his absolute ruin.

"I fought all last week, when I thought I was done," he added in conclusion, rising to pace the floor and halting to mark his point, "and I made another loan. It was all I could get. I thought it would tide me over. Now he has engineered the final coup, in buying up some notes of mine — of course through a friend — and insisting on payments that cannot be made, and so — I rise to take the gaff." His smile was a ghastly, mirthless attempt, such as one would expect on the lips of a warrior, who, about to die, salutes great Cæsar on his throne. He added, "I suppose 'he who takes up the Street must perish by the Street'; but partners should be square!"

Thurley was stirred to the depths of her womanly nature. Gaillard, she knew, had "confessed" his failure in the fight he had waged with a species of relief, as to one who had once been something more than just a social acquaintance. She felt, indeed, that she was the only one to whom it could have been told. And therein she was right. She controlled her one great impulse by a splendid effort of will; but her course was as clear as the wind.

"When must it end?" she inquired. "When must you meet your obligations or — go under?"

"To-morrow afternoon."

"And how much money would it need to pay — I mean to win — to win?"

He smiled again and shook his head. "Nearly twenty-five thousand dollars."

Her excitement grew intense. The color flamed up-

ward in her cheeks superbly. "Then thirty thousand would make it absolutely certain?"

"Absolutely. However, I might as well wish for thirty millions. But — why —"

"I wish to let you have it!" she interrupted feverishly, her eyes ablaze with the prospect of Fiaschi's defeat. "Please don't ask me why to-day; but say that you'll take it — and win!"

Gaillard stared. "You wish me to beat Fiaschi?"

"More than anything in all the — You'll take it? You'll let me help?"

"But if I should lose, after all, be a year or more repaying —"

"You mustn't lose! You shan't! You're too American! Will you take the money — and come out on top in the end?"

"I will, by Heaven!" he answered, a surge of color leaping for the first time to his face. "Thurley —"

"Please, nothing but your consent," she interrupted. "I'll go at once and get the check."

And presently Gaillard left the house, the bit of paper in his pocket and wonder and fire in his soul. It was strange that even in his humbled mood, he could not understand. He was certain a spark of her former love had ignited Thurley's heart.

Thurley, on her part, as thoroughly convinced that her action would be instantly comprehended, went to Alice radiantly excited. "He's gone," she said. "I don't suppose you saw him — pale as a pan of dough and frightfully nervous. I have lent him thirty thousand dollars."

Alice suppressed a gasp, but looked at her, stunned with amazement. She merely said, "Acton Gaillard?"

Thurley realized abruptly that the shock to Alice was staggering, though the reason escaped her intuitions. "Why, yes, I — Do you very much mind?" she asked her anxiously. "I guess I did it before I realized that the money —"

"The money was yours, to dispose of as you please," Alice interrupted, smiling peculiarly. "Do you feel like a drive to Mrs. Ashley Duane's? Lady Calthorp has something important to communicate and hoped we'd come this afternoon."

"Why, yes," said Thurley, a little afraid she had overstepped the mark at last and sacrificed the confidence that Alice had heretofore reposed in all her words and actions. "Have I done something very wrong or foolish?"

"Certainly not," said Alice, almost reassuringly; "but may I ask if Acton requested such a loan?"

"Oh, not in the least!" said Thurley sturdily. "It surprised him as much as — as it seems to astonish you."

Alice kissed her, to dispel a line of worry on her brow.

"Then perhaps he's as fortunate as I, dear child; so go and be dressed, in a hurry."

Thurley went off to her own boudoir, much puzzled in her mind.



## CHAPTER XLV

### A DROVE OF LIONS

THE elements essential to a logical climax of the innocent "royal" diversion that Alice Van Kirk had permitted, with Thurley as the central figure, were swiftly gathering when, on Friday afternoon, two widely opposed individuals made their appearance at the Fifth Avenue mansion.

One of the visitors was Robley Stuyverant; the other was Pelevin. Each had purposely chosen a moment of Thurley's absence from the "palace" the better to further his ends.

Pelevin came in the guise of a servant, seeking employment as footman. He made his application in the region below stairs, where such an incident, though decidedly unusual, excited no particular interest and certainly no disquietude. His desires were immediately communicated to the mistress of the house, who promptly, but in a spirit of kindness, replied that her retinue afforded no vacancies, wherefore she regretted her inability to accomodate another servant.

Pelevin, as a matter of fact, had expected some such reply. During the few close packed minutes of his stay, however, he had managed to acquire a number of important facts concerning the plan of the house, the number of its servants, their duties, and a little of the ways of life of those who resided above. When he presently departed he was singularly undepressed for

one whose desires for employment had met with so little encouragement. Even the servants to whom he had spoken were a trifle suspicious of his manner; but his visit was soon forgotten.

Stuyverant, bent on a mission as vital to himself as that which brought Pelevin, seemed to Alice a trifle constrained when he entered the room where she was sitting. It was her own retreat, the room in which she had always received him before, an apartment where the very atmosphere was charged with discussions of Thurley. It was destined to be charged anew to-day.

"Well, Robley," said Alice, once more restored to her lighter, more jovial mood, "you appear as chipper and gay as a clam. Has someone died and left you another fortune?"

Stuyverant attempted to smile; but its failure verged on the tragic. "I'm all right," he asserted, but without convincing emphasis. "I just dropped in to ask if by any chance you or Miss Thurley may have received a letter addressed to me—intended for me, would be more accurate—and perhaps directed wrongly by mistake?"

"Why, yes," said Alice. "Thurley brought me some such epistle this morning, and we sent it at once to your address; at least, it was posted by noon. Why? Was it anything unduly important?"

"I must ask you what comprised its text?"

"Oh, it was just a sort of business announcement, I should say; something about some bonds; a special concession from the Paris Bourse, if I remember correctly. It merely directed your attention to the fact that investments were now made possible in some sort of continental bonds."

"Did it come from the office of Acton Gaillard?" His gravity impressed her inescapably.

"Why, yes. We rather wondered, of course. I felt convinced that some blunder of mixing envelopes— Perhaps you received some other note, or letter, addressed to Thurley."

"I did," said Stuyverant, his face peculiarly drawn. "I have brought it with me, thinking it might be of value."

He drew an envelope from his pocket, removed a folded sheet of writing linen, and placed it in Alice's hand. She took it with a sense of the ominous, impending.

It was the briefest bit of scrawl:

DEAR THURLEY.—Just a formal receipt, acknowledging the loan of your thirty thousand dollars. You must let me come Friday night, as per my earlier request. With love,  
ACTON.

Alice read it at a glance, and the color mounted swiftly to her face. A more provoking accident she could scarcely imagine occurring at this particular time. She looked up presently and met a somewhat stern and chilling gaze from Robley's blue-gray eyes. There seemed to be nothing adequate to say, and nothing to do. She tried a smile.

"Well?"

"It's true?" he said. "She has made him this loan?"

Alice arched her brows. "My dear Robley, isn't that rather a matter of her concern alone?"

He rose and rammed his hands in his pockets. "Ob-

viously. You realize, of course, Alice, that I made this discovery through no fault or prying of my own?"

"Is it necessary to state that, Robley?"

His manner altered instantly. "Oh, I—I'm hardly responsible for what I may say or do! This thing has jarred me, that's all."

She looked out at the window. "Well, it jarred me."

"You knew about it before?"

"She told me she had lent him the money."

"What do you make of it, if I may ask?"

"I made a wry face over it," said Alice; "but — what is the use?"

"Then it doesn't make you happy?"

"Very few of the world's occurrences seemed designed for my particular joy."

He crossed to another window and stood there, staring out at the park. "I admit I've been fool enough to dream dreams," he confessed, after a moment of silence. "I could, I believe, have accepted philosophically anything that the needs of a nation, at the hands of this young Grand Duke, anything that political necessity — Hadn't you seen any signs of this relationship with Gaillard?"

"Perhaps; but I thought —" She did not finish; but shrugged her shoulders instead.

"Had he met her before?"

"So I hear."

"You weren't consulted first about this loan?"

Alice smiled as before, without mirth or special meaning. "My dear Robley, we must neither of us forget that Thurley is of age and the mistress of her own affairs."

"Oh, but this Gaillard!" he exclaimed impatiently. "I suppose he's coming here to-night?"

"I believe he is."

He turned and looked at her squarely, his fine face rechiseled in its lines. "I couldn't have believed it, Alice, if I hadn't had this accidental notice."

"Accidental?" she echoed. "You don't really think Mr. Gaillard —"

"The mixing of envelopes doesn't often occur in a business man's office without express intent," he answered incisively. "Still, I may of course be mistaken."

"He couldn't be such a cad," said Alice. "Although I might have expected — Oh, Robley, let's not attempt to judge, to settle, to do anything about this unfortunate matter here this afternoon. Come and see Thurley for yourself."

"To-night?"

"Good heavens, no! I don't know how we're going to manage — Come to-morrow, or Sunday. Come when you're calmer, anyway. It's so easy to make mistakes."

"Alice, you really wish to encourage me to hope?"

"To hope for what?"

"You know how I feel toward your protégée."

"But I don't know how she feels toward you. And if I did — my dear boy, I've about made up my mind that the Fates will have their way, no matter who it pinches. That's all. Now do say good by and go."

He had barely gone when one of the servants brought her a letter, delivered, he said, by special messenger, waiting to take a reply. The letter was di-

rected to Alice. It came from Baron von Hochhaus on affairs of the young Grand Duke.

Alice read it with amusement — of a kind. It was not, however, a humorous epistle. It was practically a warning that the ardent and somewhat unmanageable young Karl-Wilhelm, Grand Duke of Saxe Hertze and Heimer, desired to honor himself by calling that evening, unless his visit should be inconvenient or untimely.

In the midst of the letter's perusal, Thurley returned, fresh from a gallop in the park with her groom and a special guardian on whose attendance Alice had insisted.

Alice called her at once to hear the note, particularly the postscript, which read as follows:

I am practically powerless to avert this adventure on the part of his Excellency Karl-Wilhelm, and I therefore take this means and occasion to state that Princess Thirvinia, recently discovered, and found to be quite ill, is by the grace of God, so miraculously improved that her immediate return to Europe is contemplated. You will readily understand, I am certain, and perhaps even pardon me, if I refer to a former conversation with yourself in which I suggested the service possible to Hertzegotha in a complete discouragement of the Grand Duke by one of the noblest young women it has ever been my pleasure to encounter. May I beg a little further indulgence in behalf of my worried and disordered country?

Thurley, already acquainted with the outcome of the Baron's former visit, during the time of her own despair and anguish, was now amazed to learn of the finding of the actual Princess. She was perhaps also

a little startled concerning possible results. She entirely overlooked the point that appealed to Alice.

"Does it mean that we—that discovery— Does it mean very much to us?" she inquired gravely, looking at Alice in her girlishly wistful way. "You can take it as part of the joke?"

"It isn't that, my dear," said Alice, lightly enough. "I was thinking how utterly absurd it is for Acton Gaillard, the Count, and now the Duke to insist, as they have, on coming here all in one evening—all together—or one behind the other, perhaps,—for I hardly suppose you'll enter the cage with all your lions in a drove."

"Oh, he does want to come to-night, of course," said Thurley, still distinctly serious. "I had completely forgotten. But Count Fiaschi's to come by eight—and be gone in fifteen minutes. Mr. Gaillard arrives at half-past eight and—" Her eyes flashed fun and warmth. "Why not let the Duke be last, at nine o'clock? I think I'd like it—three within the hour."

"I thought so, or thought perhaps it might be entertaining," answered Alice, aware of the general reception planned for the Count, but puzzled still by Thurley's attitude with Gaillard. "Shall I answer nine to-night?"

"You may as well," said Thurley. "I've heard there's a charm in threes."

How easy it was to remember the things that Robley had declared! How eagerly, gladly, and naturally her thoughts went forth to find him, day and night! How she treasured the flowers that came from his hand, among the houseful constantly arriving! And how often she wished she could tell him things, share

with him all the long day's happenings, in the way that comrades should!

"Charms in threes!" repeated Alice. "I should hope there might be some few charms distributed among this oddly assorted trio; but I greatly rejoice that the Count's have all been discovered."

The Count, as a matter of fact, had been more than discovered recently; he had been a bit exposed, likewise a bit defeated — and was blissfully unaware of either pertinent occurrence.

Not only had Gaillard rounded on him brilliantly, recouping lost ground with a second burst of skill, inspired by Thurley's unexpected help and attitude, but the all important intelligence imparted by Lady Honore Calthorp at the tea was of such a nature that Alice was radiant with joy. The hour had come to mete out punishments for things endured under the laws of the social world — and Alice was a woman.

Thurley had drifted far away, on a thought of the young Duke Karl. "Some of his ways are very charming," she said. "I felt that you thought so too."

Alice, who had spoken of the Count, betrayed new surprise. She felt she should never in the least know Thurley after all. "Why, yes," she agreed. "But there are charms and charms — and fortunately no man has them all. Poor little Zora Norton married a very charming creature three years ago. The last time I saw her she looked at me like a Dresden china shepherdess and sweetly lisped, 'Doesn't a woman have to love her husband an awful lot not to hate him utterly?' I've thought of it often since."

"But," said Thurley, "aren't you glad you're married?"



Alice smiled. "My dear, I like the changes of climate. I'm hardy enough to endure them, and they make me hardier for more. Now I think you'd better rest awhile, for your three in tandem to-night."

Thurley felt a great excitement instantly assert itself, so much did the meetings presage. "I'll rest if I can," she answered, and went to the care of her maids.

## CHAPTER XLVI

### ANSWERING THE COUNT

THURLEY did not rest; her brain was too alive and the fever too active in her pulses. Mysterious arrivals, plus an air of hurry and excitement, pervaded all the house. She suffered herself to be dressed for dinner in a dainty gown that, with its softness and its frailty, completely belied the strength, the courage, and the resolution with which she was amply endowed.

Major Phipps appeared in time for dinner. He was if possible, more tanned, more explosive, and more hearty than ever before. His admiration for Thurley was likewise more pronounced. He bragged of her discovery quite immodestly, taking such mountains of credit to himself that Alice was thoroughly shadowed.

"The one truly noteworthy and creditable achievement of my career, by George!" he asserted. "Re-establishes my mental acumen. It does, sir! I've said so repeatedly. But by the gods of battle! that satisfaction is nothing as compared with the fatherly affection engendered in my breast — fatherly and brotherly and uncleish — and — and —"

"Angelic," Alice supplied dryly. "It's very beautiful and touching. But will you kindly indicate whether or not you will have some peas, thereby providing a moment for Thurley's blushes to subside?"

Thurley's color, however, was destined for the brief-

est subsidence. The Major kept it flaming pleasantly for an hour, both during and after dinner; and eight o'clock romped in upon them all, it seemed quite prematurely, to ignite it again.

Alice herself was nervously perturbed and a trifle feverish, when one of the servants came to announce the arrival of Count Fiaschi.

The Major excused himself in haste and promptly disappeared.

Alice, in one of her motherly moods, came swiftly to her "Princess" and placed both hands on her shoulders. "Because he happened to demand that he see you alone is no reason why Fiaschi should be gratified, unless you wish it," she said. "I feel as if perhaps it might be much easier if I remained with you as chaperon all the time he is here."

"If the horrid creature should attempt what he did before —" Thurley halted, vividly remembering the kiss that Fiaschi had dared to misappropriate. "Of course he wouldn't if you were there. And yet if he's here to demand — Perhaps the way we have planned it is the best, after all. You're sure that she — that everything is ready?"

"Leave that to me," said Alice, a little pale, but smiling. "I'll go with you now and excuse myself at once."

They went together to the golden room where the Count was impatiently waiting.

He was flushed with a sense of victory over Gaillard and his own irresistible prowess with the women. He had sent great masses of roses earlier and was certain now that the single American beauty worn on Thurley's bosom was selected from his offering. He could never

have dreamed it was Stuyverant's rose, worn as a token of their comradeship, and also as a talisman to guard her heart from evil.

To do him credit for mere physical appearance, the Count had never been handsomer in his life. His glossy black hair, his damask skin, and his long lashed eyes, which burned like molten garnets, dashed with liquid whirls of brown and ebony, were practically physical perfection. Only his mouth, over-red and sensuous, supplied a hint of the animal crouched behind his mask.

He wasted no energy in passing the time of day. "Ah! the banishment of all the little fidgeting world!" he exclaimed in immediate rapture, as Thurley and Alice advanced to give him formal greeting. "By the vision of yourself I am transported — yes, as on the wings of ecstasy that for the highest exaltations shall exist!" and he took Thurley's hand to raise it toward his lips, almost ignoring Alice, to whom he should have first addressed himself.

Thurley smiled conventionally, withdrawing her hand with a firm slow gesture at once reserved and vigorous. "How interesting if visions took the place of aëroplanes!" she answered lightly. "It is said the transportation business is very profitable."

"Ah!" said Fiaschi. "Madam Van Kirk, I am charmed likewise at this encounter, yes!"

"Only charmed?" said Alice, arching her brows. "Not one little flight when you see me? Perhaps you wish to surprise me later?"

Thurley felt her heart give a knock at the hidden suggestion.

"Ah!" said the Count. "It is not a fault to be

blind — it is one affliction. Shall I not be blind when I thus behold Miss Thurley?"

To give him due credit once again, Thurley was matchless, brilliantly, bewilderingly beautiful, the animation of suppressed excitement, plus the fire of resentment, outblazing jewel marvels in her eyes, her color and her pulses vibrant with life reduced to sheer loveliness and magnetism. Never had prettier patrician grace enthroned itself in her carriage. Her golden hair was such a coronet as regal simplicity might choose for its dainty queen. Her arms and her shoulders were superb. Ariel, Titania, Diana, the exquisite beings and goddesses of all the ages, might have bequeathed her a tithe apiece of their own loveliness to make her the Princess she was.

"Blind?" said Alice. "I have often wondered if love is so blind that a married man cannot see another pretty woman."

If the Count changed color for a second, he instantly laughed it away. "Ah! this American wit!" said he. "The rapier is not more quick, more certain." He was ill at ease with Alice in the room; but concealed his impatience with some degree of art.

"Well," said Alice, shrugging her shoulders, "since I am not seen, perhaps I may be excused for a moment, by your leave."

Fiaschi made little concealment of his pleasure, thus to be left alone with Thurley. No sooner was Alice gone than he strode hot-paced to where the "Princess" had taken a seat.

She rose at once, not to be taken at the slightest disadvantage.

"For this moment I have lived and could have

died!" he breathed with suddenly liberated fervor, once more catching up her hand and attempting to press his lips upon it. "If it were only that some word were sufficiently beautiful to name you in,—some word more fragrant, more passionate, more enraptured than 'divinity,'—ah! how my soul would leap to its birth—to lay it at your feet! My idol—my—"

"Will you not be seated?" Thurley interrupted, her breath coming quickly, her anger rising, as she felt the insult of his words and glances, while his eyes sought to rivet her own. "You mentioned in your note some special reason for an interview."

"Ah! and you have not guessed? You have not been aware of my soul's desire, my famishing of the spirit, my heart's consuming thirst? I did not suppose even walls, the horrible tumult of this city, anything, could upon it avail to close it out! But I have waited its accomplishment how—God alone knows—this waiting! But I wished to come with my hands, my arms, brimming with fortune! It is done. I have come to-night—"

"To tell me you have made a fortune? May I offer my congratulations?"

Thurley was a little fearful of his ardor, fearful of some spring of the animal she felt behind his smile and eyes. She could only hope for the moment to dash his heats with the coldly commonplace.

As well might she have attempted to dash a Vesuvian eruption. "The fortune, bah!" said Fiaschi more warmly than before, his hands fairly wrung and perspiring with impatience to clasp her hotly by the arms and strain her to his lips. "It is a bauble only to drop

at your feet and forget! But the love I lavish — the adoration — ”

“Listen!” said Thurley, interrupting desperately. “I thought I heard the bell. I must ask your pardon if I presently have to excuse myself. I’m expecting another caller, who is likewise coming on business.”

“Business?” echoed Fiaschi. “Business?”

Thurley’s strength came surging to her aid. “What else could it be you particularly wished to say?”

The Count was increasingly agitated. “It is not business — the mighty demand of the soul!” he cried to her fervently. “Yet I have tried to ask before, and I ask again — a definite answer — from your heart — your lips! You are now, already, my soul’s one choice — my all! But — you will be my wife?”

Thurley paled when it came, prepared as she was to hear his declaration and request. Anger and scorn flared quickly in her eyes, despite her efforts at control. “Your answer to that?” she asked him lightly clapping her hands and trembling with surcharged dynamics of the moment. “Your answer, Count Fiaschi, is here.”

A door behind him had opened at the signal. He turned like a cat as her glance sped past his shoulder.

Countess Fiaschi, who had come here once to threaten and if need be to fight for her rights, came haltingly into the room, in front of Alice. She was white as paper. She put out her hand to support herself from falling, weakly groping for a chair near by, as her eyes remained fixed on the Count.

“*Volga me Dios!*” breathed the suddenly wilted Fiaschi. “*Por hamor de Dios y todos los santos!*”

"It is my right to come!" cried his trembling wife, by way of meeting the blazing anger, shame, and accusation flaring in his gaze. "Forgive me, José! It is my love— I could not bear to let you go!" She went down abruptly on her knees at his feet and clasped him wildly by the legs. "God help me if I love you so," she added, "for I was sure I had my love from God!"

"Oh, Thurley," said Alice quietly, "may I see you for a moment?"

Thurley turned to the Count, who remained there, livid, and helplessly staring at his wife. "You will excuse me, I am sure, if I say good evening."

But the Count had been stricken deaf and dumb as well as pallid and blind. He made no reply as Thurley and Alice quitted the room and left him fully answered.

Later they heard the closing of the door that led to the outside world. A servant came to announce, in accordance with directions, that the Count and Countess were gone. The evening had fairly begun.



## CHAPTER XLVII

### A THOROUGHBREED

GAILLARD had rarely in his life felt more assured, more confident, restored, or at his ease. The man was amazingly transformed. There is no such tonic as victory with a dash of self approval. He had entered on his fight against Fiaschi with a vigor so reinforced and dominant that the Count could scarcely have recognized the man he had encountered. He had smashed his way to supremacy in the situation with a power that astonished himself.

To-night he was firmly on his feet again — and looked the part. His skin was clear and ruddy, his eyes were steadied and apparently hardened to a new blued steel species of temper. With composure regained and buoyancy reasserted in his step and carriage, he felt himself once more master of his destiny and able to cope with the world.

Thurley was honestly glad to behold a change so complete and unexpected. She had once felt untold admiration for the qualities crystallized in Gaillard's composition. A slight recurrence of her oldtime appreciation of his better self stirred in her being to-night. She knew he had beaten Fiaschi, and for that she rejoiced as a friend.

"You see I couldn't wait, in my wish to tell it all in person," he explained, holding her hands as she faced him there alone. "I wanted to come and acknowledge

frankly that you saved the situation. I wanted to know that you are glad, as I see you are, in your eyes."

"It gratifies me very much," she told him sincerely. "If I helped a little, I rejoice." She withdrew her hands and asked him to find himself a seat.

He drew a chair close to hers and leaned familiarly forward, reaching to take her hand again where she leaned on a golden stand.

With a motion apparently slow and unintentioned, she placed the hand in her lap.

"Thurley," he said, in the modulated tone she had once responded to with thrills, "you're a noble little girl, the finest little woman I have known in all the world."

"Thank you," she answered lightly. "We are both still rather young."

He was not to be diverted from his purpose. He seemed almost not to have heard her reply. "You know I told you, once upon a time, there was no one like you, Thurley. I told you that you were a thoroughbred. Remember?"

Thurley grew more self-possessed. "I recall — some — could it have been in connection with anything in particular?"

"Oh, come, little girl, you remember," he said. "I'll face it, take my medicine, everything I deserve. I thought at one time I was doomed for the ax; but thank God your spirit's too big for petty revenge! You are a thoroughbred. I knew it all along. But, heavens! little Captain of the *Tigress*, what a wonderful relief, what an unthinkable happiness, to get back to our good old chumming again and forget all that's gone between!"

This time he caught her hand so swiftly and with a grip so sure that she had neither time nor strength to escape.

"You are hurting my fingers," she told him, unmoved by his speech. "Please sit back in your chair, Mr. Gaillard, and —"

"Mr. Gaillard?" he echoed abruptly.

She smiled and arched her brows. "What else should I say?"

"Do you mean to keep this up?" he said. "Come now, Thurley, be yourself. You've punished me enough."

"Punished you, for what?"

"You know what I mean. What does a college graduate know of what he wants, or says, or does, at a time like that? You've punished me, Thurley, and you know it."

"Isn't it just the usual college sort of thing?" She forced a smile which his egotism misinterpreted.

"You little rogue!" he answered, doing his best to outmatch her mirth and laugh her mood away. "We cared for each other, as you cannot deny, and that sort of caring lasts. If not, then why your friendship now, when you saw me down and out?"

"I agree to friendship heartily," she said. "I honestly wish —"

"It's more than that, little girl," he interrupted, leaning closer, as before. "Now tell me candidly, like the candid little girl I've always known, why did you fly to my assistance with thirty thousand dollars?"

Her face was grave, even pale. She faced him steadily. "In the first place, I very much wished you to beat that man, Count Fiaschi."

"Yes, I felt that, of course. I understood all that. But the real reason, Thurley, that's the one I'm after." He was sure of the corner to which she was forced, sure she would not evade, sure she would melt, as in the early days, and tell him what he wished to know, if only with her eyes.

She did not evade — and her eyes were eloquent of truth. "I have been long anxious to repay you for all the flowers and chocolates, the attentions, kindnesses, and college friendship," she answered in a clear, low voice that surprised herself, so violent was the beating of her heart. "I have wished to even up the favors, and show you the sort of friendship I learned was all I should ever have expected, there at home. I wished to preserve the friendly feeling you have always entertained. I hope I have — and I hope you understand."

He could not fail to understand, with a glaring vividness that left him stunned and dazed. He was placed under lifelong obligations — and cast to the outer regions where a formal, half-cold friendship was all he could ever expect. The dominant power, once his and neglected, had melted into air and gone forever. The sense of it all crept through and over him with the tangible effect of a tide, chilling his being through and through. He was silent for a moment, staring at her fixedly. When he spoke his voice had changed.

"You mean that, Thurley? That's your final word?"

She met his gaze unflinchingly. "You asked me to be candid. I have taken you at your word." She marveled at the ease with which she answered.

A reactionary passion rose for a final beating against

the barriers within him. The old self, yet to be outgrown, once more took possession of his mood. He rose in his heat. "By Heaven," he said, "if I'd known of this I'd never have taken your help, your money, anything! You haven't the right — You'd better be careful, Thurley, how you play with a man like this! Your position here, this masquerade —"

"Don't threaten again to divulge it, please — for your own sake!" she interrupted. "It would be so useless, after what I have planned for myself. It would rob me so utterly of all I have remaining of the Acton Gaillard I'm sure I used to know."

"You've tricked me!" he said less truculently. "You are living a trick! Your head has been turned! You seem to think — Oh, Thurley, I don't mean all this madness! I'm not an absolute cad! But this thing hits me — when I was sure — when I thought you'd forgiven — Forget what I've said! Tell me you didn't mean it. I want to be friends, be all I ever was — and more! I want a chance to prove I'm a better friend than you think. I've confessed my blunder made at college. Let's be friends again and begin all over, where we were —"

Thurley too had risen. She had never felt more distant from him, more ostracized by all that he said and did, nor yet more sorry or helpless. She looked at him a little wistfully, poignantly affected by it all. "I want your friendship, believe me," she said. "I want it very much, and to give you mine — the most that I can offer."

Something occurred, deep down in his nature, to alter his view of himself. His face was twitching with the struggle of his better entity to force itself to the top.

"All you can offer," he said peculiarly, as much to himself as to Thurley, and he nodded his head with a grim, if belated, comprehension of what it implied. "I have made a fool of myself!" A ghastly sort of smile played for a moment over his features. "Will you shake hands, Thurley, for good by? Will you let me tell you again, in a different way—you *are* a thoroughbred?"

She gave him her hand, which he gripped as he might have clasped a man's. "You're more than that," he added huskily. "You're a Princess, if ever one lived!" He sounded the light in her frank brown eyes, finding there nothing but the truth. "Good by," he murmured, "God keep you as you are!"

And Thurley sat down when the door had closed, wondering at it all. She was there when Alice entered, excited by new events.

"The Duke has been here for nearly fifteen minutes!" she said. "And now here's the Baron and Wenck!"

"I know," said the Princess, smiling faintly. "I wrote and asked them to come."

"Good Lord," said Alice. "Talk about the Sphinx! I just saw number two go out—Acton, of course—and looking more as if he had found himself than I think I somehow expected."

"Oh, I'm glad!" said Thurley honestly. "That makes me very happy!"

Alice looked her disconcerted puzzlement. After all her hopes she was nearly convinced that Gaillard still possessed the girl's real heart, in spite of all that had happened.

"The Duke is wearing out his shoes, his pockets,

and his intellect," she stated in her customary spirit. "Will you have him in with his tamer, or alone?"

Thurley smiled a little wearily. "He probably prefers to come alone, like all the others."

"You poor, dear child!" said Alice, and kissed her in sympathy and love.

## CHAPTER XLVIII

### A CLIMAX

THE something boyishly honest in the Duke—a charming quality that Thurley had previously enjoyed—beset her now as she faced him candidly, resolved to win him to the plan that she felt would make for the happiness of all. He was dressed as Colonel of the Baron's Regiment von Seydlitz, and was splendid and good to see. She found the matter difficult, in the light of his repeated protestations that he would not return to Hertzegotha without her and that Kingdoms were hateful in his sight.

"You see you haven't been fair," she said, smiling to take away the sting. "When you knew I was not the Princess, but the merest no-one in America, you treated me quite as if you had never met your fiancée and were ready to let me think you thought me she. You'll admit to me now that you knew it all from the first?"

He nodded. "And that I was your slave also, from the first."

She laughed at his gravity. "But nobody wants a little cheat."

"It is true; yet everybody wants a little Princess."

"But I'm not!"

"But you are!"

"Oh, we're wasting such a lot of time!" she declared. "I just know you're ashamed of the way you



are treating Princess Thirvinia! I know that deep in your heart of hearts your sense of duty to your country cries out as love could never cry, that you know you must go, and you wish to go — and take the Princess with you as your bride! I shouldn't like you in the least if you were any other way. And you want me to like you a little?"

"Oh, god of love!" he answered, as only a tragic youth may answer. "But surely you can like me a little for myself?"

She was very much in earnest. "Not a particle if you abandon your affianced Princess, your distracted Kingdom, or the nobler self I wish so much to admire."

"But when I love you —" he protested. "Is that nothing?"

"No," she laughed, "it's a nuisance — to everyone but me. But the love of a man who deserts his country and his honor — Oh!"

His sense of shame, only a little narcotized by the brilliance and appeal of her beauty, struggled in his heart. "But — Princess — I am helpless," he declared. "What can I do?"

"Shake hands and say good by," she answered readily. "Promise you'll make your genuine Princess happy, and serve your land, and let me call the Baron here and tell him how greatly I admire you."

"The Baron?" he echoed. "He is not here?"

"Of course," said Thurley. "I wrote him to come. I'll ask him now —"

Her sentence was never completed.

A glare of blinding light that penetrated the window's thickest curtains flashed from without, in the snow-bound park. A terrifying detonation, shatter-

ing glass and rocking the house, instantly followed, with a jar and a shock as if of some world disaster. Shrieks and screams from the avenue, someone's cry within the building, and a heterogeneous medley of alarms arose on the second of lull that followed the thud and impact of the explosion.

Then the door was flung open and Alice was there, wild eyed and gasping, horrified by the dreadful things she had fully expected to discover in the room where Thurley had been left.

"Deary!" she cried. "Thank God! I thought —"

"Karl!" cried the voice of the Baron at her heels, and he ran in after Alice, as certain as she that here in this room a dynamite bomb had been fired.

"What was it?" cried Thurley, abruptly possessed of a dread that seemed to cast her back to her recent frights and perils. "What has happened?"

"Oh, I thought I should die before I could reach the door!" said Alice, pale and fearfully shaken. "It must have been out in the street!"

The Baron had hastened at once to a window. Wenck had been instantly ordered outside to see what might be done.

"Ah, in the park!" said Hochhaus, enormously relieved, and the others hastened to see.

A crowd had gathered in the street below with promptness truly amazing. A swarming, excited mass of beings it was, with men swiftly running from all directions and cabs, automobiles and 'busses congregating in the dark, congested throng.

It was all half-lighted only, by the street lamps gleaming through the trees. In the snow of the park

the congress had its center, and Wenck, escaping from the turgid eddy of beings, came hastening back to report.

"Pelevin!" he said to his chief at once, and Thurley nearly sank where she stood.

Someway, the creature, with a gas-pipe engine of death and destruction in his hand, had exploded his horrible implement prematurely, there at the wall of the frozen park, on his way to cross the avenue and enter Alice's basement.

The Duke was gray as ashes. "My God! what I should bring on this house!" he said, and Thurley, dimly hearing, understood.

They were spared a detailed account of the mangled form across the crowded thoroughfare; but of fright they could not be relieved. The Baron, the Duke, and Wenck at length departed, Karl-Wilhelm matured in his manhood and resolution suddenly, by the shock to his nerves and his heart.

He took the time for one long look of gravity into Thurley's eyes, while her fearless gaze met his own. "You had already taught me my duty, believe me," he said, his face strangely hardened to that of a man. "I trust I shall always merit a little of your admiration — Princess Thurley." He raised her hand to his lips, kissed it reverently, and retreated backward from the room.

Late that night, when Thurley looked down on the avenue and park, at last once more deserted, only a great gaping orifice, where snow and earth and rock had been, marked the spot of Pelevin's last venture. Then Alice came in, still white and quaking, dressed for retiring, but too disturbed for bed.

"Dear child, dear child!" she said as she came and took her "Princess" in her arms. "No more of my 'innocent' game. I release you from every single promise!"

Thurley looked at her unwinkingly, afraid it meant that, the game being done, she was due to be dismissed and return whence she had come.

"No more?" she said. "You — won't need me any longer?"

"For Heaven's sake, Deary, what do you mean?" demanded Alice, equally disturbed. "Need you? I never needed anyone so much in all my life! I simply intended to release you from all the foolish agreements I exacted. I realize the dangers I have plunged you in. I realize how selfish I should be, after all you've undergone, to deny you the slightest speck of happiness. That's all. If you wish to marry Acton Gaillard —"

"Alice!" cried Thurley, all but ready to laugh, despite the tragic outcome of the evening. "Marry Acton Gaillard!"

"You lent him your money, and —"

"Oh, I'll get it all back and return it to you gladly," interrupted Thurley, who had troubled her mind without respite over all the things she had done. "I didn't realize it was not really mine to give. I wanted him to beat the Count — and he did! I acted impulsively, of course, I know; but I'll surely restore every cent I used and —"

"Thurley Ruxton, what are you talking about, you silly little thing?" demanded Alice, unable to let her continue further. "That money was just as much yours as the hair of your head. You ought to be

spanked to treat me so!" But with tears in her eyes she clasped the girl against her breast and strained her there with all her strength. "You know that I love you. You know I approve of every single thing you've done — at last! If you wish to marry Mr. Gaillard, I know that — somehow — he must be splendid!"

"But I don't," objected Thurley. "I don't see why you ever thought I could!"

Alice pushed herself away and looked her squarely in the eyes. "I'm a kitten under nine days old," she said. "Maybe you'd rather not marry anyone at all."

Thurley suddenly crimsoned; but the light in her eyes increased. "I admit it would have been awfully sweet to let Robley ask me, riding that morning in the snow," she said; "but I wanted to keep the promise made to you."

Alice's eyes were abruptly brimming. "You poor dear, darling little girl!" she said, attempting to laugh, but achieving something nearer to a sob. "Let me call him up on the 'phone."

## CHAPTER XLIX

### A TRYSTING PLACE

THE telephone was not disturbed that night. A mere metal wire has frequently warmed and tingled at the voice of Cupid, speeding down its length; but Thurley had plans that were all her own, as well as a number of things to say, that took no account of instruments that render distance between the principals obligatory.

Sometime late that Friday night Gotham weather changed. A warm wind, drifting a tropical temperature from Tampa to the bleakness of New England, wrapped all the world of Manhattan in its voluptuous embrace and melted the snow from its bosom.

The morning broke with crystal clearness, the sun all gold in a turquoise sky, and the summery breeze now languidly puffing at eddying pools of melted snow till they withered and floated away.

The only mar in all the perfect morning was supplied by the city newspapers. Their accounts of the end of the miserable Pelevin, almost unanimously pronounced a Black Hand agent, whose plot had judicially miscarried, served to reawaken fears already sufficiently sleepless.

But youth is retentive of joys and hopes where alarms find but temporary lodgment. Thurley was young, and her heart was too full of her own excitements to permit large room for dreads.

She passed the morning in a constant succession of

fevers and doubts concerned alone with Robley Stuyverant. But leaning on Alice for assistance was enormously sustaining; for Alice certainly helped. It was she who telephoned at last to Stuyverant, when the psychological moment had arrived.

That was at two in the afternoon.

"Just called you up to relieve your mind and set a misconception straight," she told him cheerily. "That loan, you know, of thirty thousand, to a certain individual. It was the prettiest two-edged stroke I've seen for an age. Yes. It floored a certain Count and paralyzed its recipient like a million volts coming from a hairpin. No, I'll tell you all about it later. Why, I'm trying to inform you delicately. She did it because she wanted to squelch them both. Yes, I *thought* perhaps you'd like to know where to find her. No, she isn't here. I don't know exactly where she is myself. Now listen intently. She said she was going over in the park, — to some wonderfully romantic spot where someone broke his wrist one day — but for what earthly reason is more than mortal could guess. Now wait! Don't hurry! Robley!" But there was silence on the wire.

Thurley, at a little past the hour of two, was seated alone on that particular bench she had one day occupied when all the world, though clothed in the splendors of its autumn gold and crimson, was a gray and desolate perspective, so far as she could discern its wide expanse.

To-day the sun obliquely slanted on denuded trees and on grass down beaten and sodden from the recent snow, as well as on roads that, here in the sections of the park unfavored by the pomp and glory of wealth,

were practically deserted. Yet gleams of the world's most refulgent light seemed beckoning on all her far horizon, and, though she still had doubts and tremors, interspersed with all her hopes, the prospect seemed a verdant field of flowers and rills and song.

A plump gray squirrel, bright eyed, cozy in his furs, and confident of friendship from the whole human tribe, came inquiringly up to halt at Thurley's feet and beg for alms to crack. He tucked first one, then the other, of his tiny paws in the muff of his little breasts, gazing at her appealingly and flirting the banner of his tail.

"Hello!" said Thurley. "If I'd only thought to bring a bag of peanuts!"

Her hungry little visitor leaped up to the bench, came fearlessly up to walk across her lap, poked his active little nose against the glove on her hand, then leaped again to the earth and weather trampled sod, where he took up a search for hidden treasures.

Thurley had turned to watch him, when the faint, distant purring of a motor car spun her about on the seat.

Stuyverant came round the bend, holding the wheel as best he might with a wrist still unequal to the task.

The color leaped to Thurley's cheeks like rose leaves tossed upward in a zephyr. Then the car was halted and Stuyverant rose to leap out over his extra tires, as he had done on the first occasion.

"Oh, don't try that!" cried Thurley, her old impulsive self immediately uppermost, as she sprang to her feet and ran a little toward the car. "Please don't break anything more!"

He laughed, despite the depth of emotions in his breast, alighting quite intact.



She stood in the road to meet him and gave him her hand, as he came there doffing his cap.

"You know I don't like threes, exactly," she added, "if it means three injuries, or anything like that."

"I wonder if you'll ever meet me here again," he answered, as they turned to go to her bench. "That's the sort of threes I've hoped for — the threes with nothing but charm."

"But — they might not be — that kind — after all," she faltered, resuming the seat she had occupied. "It's so easy these days for folks to be deceived — to deceive themselves — and — everything."

He sat beside her and leaned a little forward. His face was inclined to paleness again, his eyes were intensely serious. "I think I have deceived myself for the final time — concerning some few things at least," he said, referring to his errors of judgment respecting Gaillard and her loan. "I hope to-day may render possible some final understandings."

His earnestness a little disconcerted the happiness of spirit she had instantly conceived at his coming. She could only infer that he had come upon truths he found not altogether pleasant. "I have never wished to deceive you for a moment," she said. "I made up my mind to tell you everything — absolutely everything — to-day."

It was Stuyverant's turn to be surprised and puzzled. "Everything, you mean, about your duties to Hertzegotha? Wait, please, before you answer. This may, perhaps, be our final little talk together — our last sunbright experience, after the Fates had seemed — I only wish to say that on the morning when we drove together through the snow I spoke un-

guardedly. The stress of the moment, everything, conspired to wring that declaration from my lips, and yet — ”

Her heart was sinking. “You didn’t mean it?” She tried to smile as the sunlight seemed about to vanish.

“I have come here to confess and sue for pardon together,” he told her, holding her gaze to his own with ties grown sacred and irresistible. “I love you, Princess, despite my utmost wish or sense of the hopeless plight into which I am plunged. I shall love you always, even though I have no right, even although you bid it cease, for its haunting echo in your after years. I would give my life to serve you. I would almost give it for this moment here — ours, all ours, so long as it may last! And if you find this quite beyond your pardon, nevertheless my love shall live; for none save God could make it die! And yet I hope for your pardon.”

She had closed her eyes and leaned a little back, in the sweetness and marvelous ecstasy she had no power at that moment to deny her heart, which had yearned and ached for his words.

After a moment of silence and intensity he added. “I am not to be forgiven?”

“Oh, don’t say that!” she begged him suddenly. “It is I — I who must beg for forgiveness. But I came to tell you all — every little thing — that I am not a Princess — that I am nothing in the world but just — ”

“Not a Princess!” he interrupted suddenly, catching at her hand, which he held with a pressure that hurt and crushed, yet sent mad gladness to her heart. “Not Princess Thirvinia? Not — ”

"Oh, no, no, no!" she cried. "But I never claimed I was! Alice never claimed it! We just—let the rumor go. I don't know why we did it. We never realized what dreadful things might happen, what serious consequences —"

"Thurley! Thurley! Thank God!" he broke in, wildly joyous, unspeakably relieved. "I have a right to love you then—to love you and love you and love you!"

She suddenly sprang to her feet, to avoid the madness of his wooing. "But—wait!" she cried. "I've got to tell you all! I am no one—no one—no one in the world! I don't belong in your social sphere. I'm only what Alice has made me! Now—now—you can take it all back if you like!" She had never been braver, never more beautiful, honest, splendid, in all her changeful career. She faced him frankly, her wonderful courage and candor shining in her eyes, with a light of love she feared at that moment must be forever hopeless.

"Little heart!" he said, his utterance singularly soft and charged with tenderness. "You are my little Princess, my glorious little Queen. You are what the gods have made you—my Thurley—the noblest, sweetest little woman in the world!"

She sank on the bench, weakly, her eyes abruptly filled. "Oh, Robley—don't say it, please," she begged, "if you ever want to take it back again!"

He sank on his knee, despite all sense of the time or place, and kissed her hand. "Comrade!" he said. "Beloved!"

He drove the car when at last they knew they must return to her avenue home. They were alone at last

in the room wherein so many emotions had run their course. She came to him simply, such a wealth of love overbrimming her eyes that Robley's senses lifted away from all the things of earth.

He held her passionately in his arms, while her own arms stole about his neck. Then they took and gave the wondrous kiss of glory.

## CHAPTER I

### PRINCESS THURLEY

THE social triumph of Alice Van Kirk was in no wise diminished when at length the truth concerning Princess Thirvinia was known throughout the length and breadth of Swelldom. Thurley had gained, rather than lost, admiring hosts, and the natural interest excited was increased.

The dinner that Alice long had planned was the season's social masterpiece. The holidays were spent away from town, where Robley and Thurley, like two young striplings from the Pantheon, before the pagan gods and goddesses had lost their pristine charm, found new delights and new relations with the earth and stars in the wonder of their love.

A brilliant procession of social events marched through the weeks as they sped. The recent past, with its doubts and fears, its excitements, intrigues, and startling evolutions, was gliding away on the placid sea of memory, when one more echo rolled across from far Hertzegotha, where the young Grand Duke with a bride resembling Thurley Ruxton had succeeded to the throne.

It came in the name of their majesties, but bore the signature of Baron von Hochhaus, whose personal letter was attached.

"In recognition of invaluable services to Princess Thirvinia, to the Kingdom of Hertzegotha, and to



*A honeymoon day was wafting lazily by.*

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Karl-Wilhelm-Herman, King by the grace of God, and in the name and with the love of an appreciative and perpetually grateful people," was the reading of part of the message which described a modest, but glorious girl as "defender of her Majesty the Queen" and a "Princess by special appointment of Heaven."

It was a triple "recognition." There was first the scroll, a gold laid, massive and impressive document, denoting the "extraordinary" service rendered, then "in partial liquidation of the State's indebtedness" a gift of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars, and finally a medal and full decoration of the Royal Legion of Courage.

But the last little contribution, which succeeded in quite overwhelming the heart of the "Princess by appointment of Heaven" was the merest unofficial scrawl from the big proportioned little Baron. "I trust the love of an old man, fond in his own poor personal capacity, may likewise be accepted."

There was much that was golden and marvelously sweet to gaze back upon in wonder as Thurley and Robley, at the stern of the great Atlantic liner, watched all America, green with coming spring, dip slowly down in the purple sea and disappear behind the earth's roundity. There was much that was splendid and dream fulfilling for them both to contemplate, far out to the east, where an older world would rise from the sea, above the rounded bulk of ocean. But most of all and greater than all was the world of limitless space and inexpressible splendor that the two beheld when they looked again in each other's eyes. A honeymoon day from the tropics, spiced with the fragrances of far-off Yucatan, was wafting lazily by.



Thurley smiled as she gazed at the sun splash in the water. "Is it too soon yet," she said, "to ask where I'm going to be taken?"

"To motor through Egypt first," he answered happily, "then all about the Continent, and perhaps to Hertzegotha."

She clung to his arm and leaned upon his shoulder, closing her eyes in the sheer delight she had no words to express.

Like the Prince in the tale, he leaned in rapture and kissed her on the lips.

But to all the world of love and ecstasy the Princess was already wide awake.

THE END



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